

# *Still the Bible Speaks*

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*by W. A. Smart*

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# STILL THE BIBLE SPEAKS

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## OREWORD

Many books about the Bible and its relevancy to modern life have appeared during the past few years. This is being interpreted as an indication of renewed interest in the Bible on the part of Christian people, and so it may be. But it may be more accurately recognized as the result of a rapidly growing indifference to the Bible on the part of our church people, and sometimes of our preachers. Those who love the Bible and are aware of its permanent values have become concerned, and many are writing in an attempt to stem the tide and to bring the great religious classic back to the place of influence which it deserves.

Probably many causes have contributed to the modern indifference to the Bible. One of them is certainly a wholesome reaction against the uncritical, and even superstitious, bibliolatry of the past. Naturally this reaction is strongest among the more thoughtful and intelligent, with the unfortunate result that the Bible is being rejected or ignored by just those people who are best able to understand and appreciate it.

Another reason for the neglect of the Bible is the man-centered character of our modern thinking and living. Man is the center of his universe, and the agent in its redemption. And if so, then religion itself must be justified, like experiments in a laboratory, by its ability to further man's interests.

With this emphasis on the ultimate value of man and on his adequacy for his own salvation, many of the features of classical religion have disappeared or have become quite nebulous. Sin, repentance, conversion, life after death, and many other of the older religious

ideas have become unreal to popular thinking. And back of it all is the fact that God has become unreal. Even those who believe in God find very little for him to do, for man is the be-all and the end-all of his own existence. God is thought of as an aid to man, if he is thought of at all.

The Bible, on the other hand, interprets everything in terms of God, and this supernaturalism has probably done as much as anything else to make it unacceptable to our age.

In many quarters there is renewed interest in an emphasis upon the Bible. But in at least some cases the pendulum seems to be swinging to the opposite extreme. Some of our leaders, especially in Europe, seem so eager to catch again the authoritative tones of a past revelation and to restore the centrality of the Scriptures that they neglect the contributions of patient critical and historical study, and tend to slip back into an uncritical biblicism.

Surely the truth lies with neither extreme. We must learn all the truth that the ancients knew, but we must not neglect the truth that the moderns have discovered. The problem is how to let the past speak to the present without enslaving it. We are rooted in the past, and each generation cannot start all over again in the discovery of truth and of value as each new generation of babies starts afresh in learning to talk. And this we are apt to forget, especially our more independent young people, and therefore the latest news broadcast is more significant to them than the ancient Scriptures.

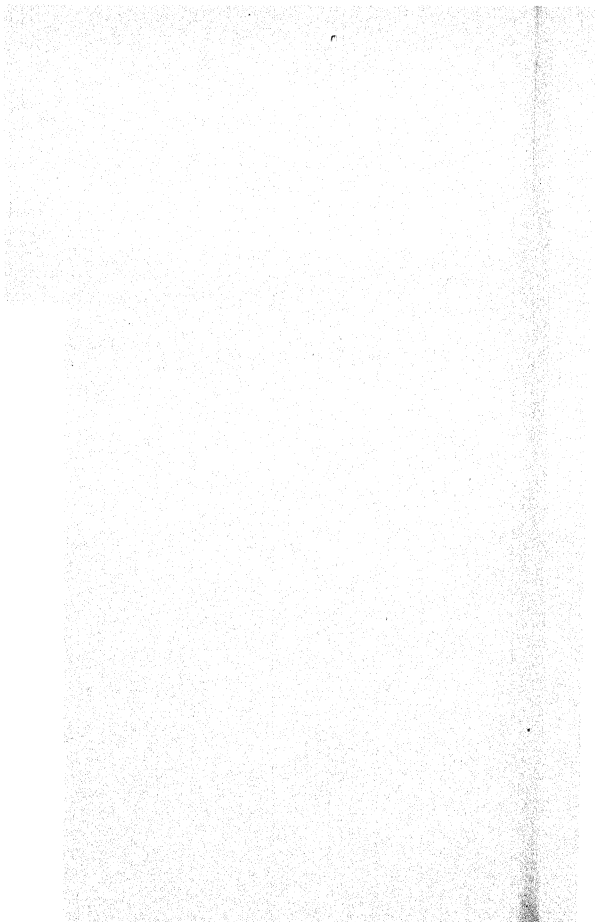
It was with such thoughts in mind that the lectures on which this book is based were undertaken. When I was invited to deliver the Cole lectures at Vanderbilt

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University in the spring of 1947 without a great deal of time for preparation, the thing that appealed most was the opportunity to add my small contribution to the growing volume of insistence upon the abiding worth of the Scriptures. Not that there was anything new or original to say, for others have already written in far more scholarly and significant fashion. But at least I could bear my personal testimony, and hope to encourage others to realize the treasure which was theirs and to go back to it over and over again, as to an inexhaustible reservoir of spiritual power and refreshing.

To Dean John K. Benton of the School of Religion of Vanderbilt University, to Chancellor Harvie Branscomb, to the members of their faculties, and to many other friends who made the delivering of these lectures such a memorable experience for me, I can only acknowledge a gratitude which can never be adequately expressed.

W. A. SMART



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# THE BIBLE TODAY

## *Our Perennial Best Seller*

THE AMAZING CIRCULATION AND POPULARITY OF THE Bible is so familiar that any eulogy of it is apt to be trite.

We know that year after year the Bible is by far the "best seller" among American books. The popular books which are so called really rank as second-best sellers, or even lower in the scale, while season after season the sale of the Bible far surpasses that of the briefly reigning favorite.

And the demand is never satisfied. The best sellers have their days and cease to be, and other favorites take their places and flourish through brief blooming periods, but the Bible continues to outsell through generation after generation, in spite of the fact that the market would seem to be always in the process of being flooded.

All of this refers, of course, only to our American books. At the same time, the Bible is being circulated more widely than any other book in other countries and other languages all over the world. It is said that even in Germany, within a year after the close of the war the Bible had a greater circulation than Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, in spite of the claim of Nazism that it would forever destroy "the little desert God" and his religion from off the face of the earth. Possibly most of us get our ideas as to how many languages and dialects are known on earth from reading figures regarding the



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translation of the Bible into foreign tongues. We read of its translation into almost two hundred languages, of the translation of the New Testament into more than four hundred, and of the availability of some parts of the Bible in more than a thousand different languages and dialects. The statement was recently made, and is probably well within the truth, that the Bible has out-sold and outcirculated every other book every year since printing began. Someone has estimated that more than sixty thousand books have been written about it, which is probably a gross understatement.

It is frequently said that the Bible is circulated but not read; that because of traditional or sentimental attitudes it is considered the proper thing to own a copy even though it is never opened, and that because it is being circulated free, or nearly free, by so many religious agencies, it is easy to do so. But this does not seem to be in harmony with the facts. Gallup polls which undertook to determine the most widely read book in America found that the Bible was well in the lead, and that a little more than six out of every ten Americans claimed to read it at one time or another.

When one passes beyond the mere possession of the Bible and its occasional reading and thinks of its influence in our modern life, statistics become impossible, and we open up areas which must be treated more fully in the chapters which follow. Lawrence E. Nelson tells us in his delightful book *Our Roving Bible* that one recent display "showed more than a thousand successful modern books and plays whose titles were scriptural quotations," and he lists twenty titles based on Adam alone.<sup>1</sup> Former President Taft, at the time of the ter-

<sup>1</sup> Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1945, p. 88.

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centenary of the King James Version, said, "Our laws, our literature, and our social life owe whatever excellence they possess largely to the influence of this our chief classic."

It has been so from the beginning. Professor Nelson explained his title *Our Roving Bible* by a subtitle, "Tracking Its Influence Through English and American Life." This literary sleuthing has uncovered so much concrete information which is relevant here that one is tempted to indulge in quotation beyond the limits of propriety. A few samples will illustrate the contents of this rich treasure house.

When the monk Augustine went to England in the sixth century, he took with him a library of nine volumes:

a two-volume Bible, two copies of the Psalms, two of the Four Gospels, an apocryphal *Lives of the Apostles*, a *Lives of the Saints*, and an *Exposition of the Gospels and Epistles*.

So complete was the domination of the culture represented by this Bible-centered library that even the alphabet of England changed. The Latin alphabet routed the old magic Teutonic runes of early English. (P. 10.)

The story of the domination of English literature by the Bible is continuous from that beginning until today. Green, in his *Short History of the English People*, says of sixteenth-century England that "the Bible was as yet the one book which was familiar to every Englishman; and everywhere its words, as they fell on ears which custom had not deadened to their force and beauty, kindled a startling enthusiasm." And from the day of Queen Elizabeth, which was "a period of transition in

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the history of the English tongue," the Bible infiltrated English literature so thoroughly that one can scarcely imagine what our literature would be with this influence removed. (P. 57.)

Shakespeare has more than twelve hundred quotations from or allusions to the Bible, and they cover thirty-six of the forty-eight books and six books of the Apocrypha. (P. 62.)

Ruskin said, "I count [training in the Bible] very confidently the most precious, and, on the whole, the one *essential* part of all my education," and a biographer who undertook to count Ruskin's biblical references got as far as four thousand eight hundred and gave it up. (P. 90.)

Robert Burns, who lacked much of being a model Christian, wrote excitedly to a friend, "I have taken tooth and nail to the Bible and am got through the five books of Moses and half way in Joshua; it is really a glorious book." (P. 89.)

Of course what was true of literature in England came to be true also of literature in America. When the Revolutionary War made importation from England impossible, the United States Congress ordered twenty thousand copies of the Bible imported from elsewhere, and later it gave its official endorsement to the first printings in the United States, an advertising boost which would create a sensation in the printing field today.

Of Emerson it has been said:

This Joshua of the nineteenth century had received from Jehovah this new charge: This book of the law shall not

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depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest give back its words in quotations, its thought in paraphrase, its wisdom in philosophy, its beauty in metaphor and symbolism. (P. 159.<sup>2</sup>)

To go to an opposite extreme from Emerson, the experience which Lincoln Steffens tells in his *Autobiography* is interesting:

What did the Christians believe exactly? I decided then and there to read the New Testament the next time I was at home and had time, not myself to believe, but to see what the good church-going Christians believed.

The experience was an adventure so startling that I wanted everybody else to have it; I still recommend people to read the New Testament as I read it, without reverence, with feet up on a desk and a pipe in the mouth, as news. It is news. It made the stuff I was writing in the magazine, old stuff. (P. 245.)

It is not surprising that the late William Lyon Phelps, the distinguished teacher of English at Yale, could say that "the Bible has been a greater influence on the course of English literature than all other forces put together." (P. 9.)

These references to the place of the Bible in literature could be multiplied to the point of boredom. And what is true of literature is true also of the other areas of our Western life. We need not stop to cite similar illustrations from painting and music, from the stage and the movies, from our humor, our laws, our ethics, and even from our daily conversation. Clarence Tucker Craig hazards "the guess that the Nativity and the Crucifixion

<sup>2</sup> H. R. Zink, *Emerson's Use of the Bible* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), p. 60.

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have been painted more frequently than any other themes in all of western art. Music is much less dependent upon a story or definite words, but even here we think of Handel's *Messiah* and Haydn's *Creation*." And one who is no musician at all could add many others.

### *The Forgotten Bible*

So much for the popularity and the wide influence of the Bible. We have cited these illustrations, not merely to heap praise upon our Scriptures, which need no added praise, but in order to contrast them with an equally significant but quite different set of estimates. And again I ask your indulgence as I quote from other sources, for the point of interest is not any one opinion, but the realization of a widely accepted viewpoint.

W. C. Bower opens his book *The Living Bible* with the statement:

Among educated people the Bible is more and more becoming an unread book.

This phenomenon of twentieth century Christianity is the more arresting because it is in such radical contrast with the historic attitude of Protestants toward the Bible.

A chaplain in the last war writes:

Most of the service men that I knew personally were almost completely ignorant of the most fundamental teachings of the Bible, unfamiliar with its best-known passages and important personalities. . . . Most of them would have been hard put to it to find a particular book in the Bible." <sup>3</sup>

Probably the last word in American culture does not

<sup>3</sup> Winston L. King, "What the Army Taught Me About the Church," *Christendom*, XI (1946), 464.

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belong to the college sophomore, but while this material was in preparation, a college sophomore justified my rapidly crystallizing estimate of the class I was teaching by stating on an examination paper that "the Bible today is losing out in our culture." More than once lecturers at universities have mentioned Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and have been asked by students who wrote those books and where copies of them could be got. Stories of the ignorance of the Bible on the part of our young people, even our religious young people, would be shocking if we had not become so accustomed to them. It is interesting that the Gallup poll referred to above found 37 per cent of those over fifty years old naming the Bible as their favorite book, only 17 per cent of those between thirty-five and fifty, and only 7 per cent of those under twenty-nine.

J. B. Pratt has stated the findings of most of those who have dealt with the religious interests of our young people.

Particularly notable is our young people's ignorance of the Bible. The King James version is rapidly going the way of Cicero and Vergil. The inspired passages of the prophets, the supreme religious poetry of the Psalms, the Sermon on the Mount, the great chapters of First Corinthians, the unique sayings of the Fourth Gospel—refer to these, quote these in the company of college juniors and seniors, and note the look of polite surprise and blank noncomprehension on the faces of a considerable number of your listeners.<sup>4</sup>

It is not surprising that one of our popular magazines a few years ago carried this statement by Frederick K. Stamm: "The Bible is not actually lost, but it is almost

<sup>4</sup> *Can We Keep the Faith?* (Yale University Press), p. 8.

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unknown. He is a rare person who spends much time with it. . . . The world is so indifferent to it that even its enemies do not bother to criticize it. . . . It is just ignored."

It is in harmony with these findings and many others like them that biblical questions have practically disappeared from student discussion groups on religion. A decade or two ago, one always found students who had questions to ask about the virgin birth, miracles, the creation story, inspiration, and other biblical teachings which worried them. Now such questions seldom arise, and the reason is, not that the students have thought their way through to more tenable viewpoints, but simply that the Bible has passed out of the area of their interest.

### *The Bible as Literature*

And here we come upon a paradox. This era in which H. S. Canby can say that "the English Bible is dying . . . and is losing, or has already lost, a power over the imagination almost unexampled in history"—this era follows several generations which have witnessed the most devoted and most intelligent study which has ever been lavished upon the Bible. The story of modern biblical study would amaze us if we were not so familiar with it. Almost every word in the Bible has been put under the microscope in order to detect its tiniest bit of information. Hundreds of manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts have been painstakingly studied for any light they might throw on any problem connected with the Bible. Foreign languages even remotely connected with the Bible have been patiently mastered. Every phase of every ancient civilization connected with the

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Bible either in time or in place has been asked to bear it witness. And while linguists have studied the texts, and historians and anthropologists have sought to reconstruct the backgrounds, archaeologists have dug into the soil and have gathered bits of light from the wreckage of civilizations long dead and buried. Year after year learned societies patiently devote their scholarship to the discovery of every tiny truth or to the correction of errors however trivial. The mass of scholarship which has been concentrated on these sixty-six little booklets is appalling, and it would be quite beyond the understanding of the original authors if they could know of it.

And the result? The result is a chorus of testimony that the Bible is dying. And this testimony comes chiefly, not from the less educated classes, who are relatively indifferent to the findings of the scholars, but from the more sophisticated classes themselves. Just when the Bible, better translated and more adequately understood than ever before, should logically be reaching more people and reaching them more intelligently, we are told that it is being ignored because it is not even interesting enough to be opposed.

Many testimonies as to the popularity of the Bible, even in modern times, have been cited above. But there is one feature of this popularity which should not be overlooked. Professor Nelson's delightful book, from which several quotations have been taken, is concerned very largely—though not entirely—with the place of the Bible in English and American literature. Other studies have been made of the place of the Bible in art and in music, and its influence upon other phases of our



culture are familiar. For all such influences we are grateful. But in evaluating the place of the Bible we should not forget that not one single book in it was written for any such purpose.

Of course the King James Version has had a profound effect upon English literature. This was partly because it was made during the period when modern English was being born. But a more potent reason was that the translation was made in the days of Shakespeare and the great Elizabethans. The great literary values which everyone recognizes in our King James Version are not necessarily the literary values of Isaiah or of Paul. They are the artistry of one of the greatest periods of the English language, and to admire them as literature and to quote their happy phrasing is often a tribute, not to the original biblical authors, but to the Elizabethans.

As a matter of fact, much that is in the Bible must surely be beautiful in any translation. Even a clumsy translation could scarcely spoil the simple beauty of many of the psalms, the overwhelming voice of Jehovah in Job, or the love passage in First John. But it is very doubtful whether many of the biblical writers were concerned with literary excellence in the modern sense. They would never have felt that their writings had accomplished their purpose by being admired for literary beauty. And it is certain that, when tested by the standard of literary excellence, some parts of the Bible are in their original languages extremely clumsy. Edgar J. Goodspeed has said that "the Corinthians complained that Paul was rude in speech, and he admitted it. In fact he refused to change, for fear that his diction might

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come to overshadow his message." And again, "The New Testament . . . owes almost nothing to literary artistry, and everything to the ideas it had to convey." <sup>5</sup>

At times Paul dictated under such emotional tension that his grammar became hopelessly confused. A recent writer copies out one of his long, involved passages, and his first comment is, "What a sentence!" Under the skilled hands of our King James translators the English version transforms heavy and awkward style into grace and beauty. It is a commonplace among Greek scholars that of all our New Testament books, only Hebrews and the writings of Luke even approach the literary excellence of classical Greek.

The Bible cannot survive merely as a model of literary style, nor as a source of inspiration for artists. It is a book about religion, and as T. S. Eliot has reminded us, it has infiltrated into other fields only because in the past so many people have gone to it for its religious messages. Eliot astutely comments:

Those who talk of the Bible as a "monument of English prose" are merely admiring it as a monument over the grave of Christianity. . . . The Bible has had a *literary* influence upon English literature *not* because it has been considered as literature, but because it has been considered as the report of the Word of God, and the fact that men now discuss it as "literature" probably indicates the *end* of its literary influence.<sup>6</sup>

If the religious interest in the Bible dies, other uses will automatically cease.

<sup>5</sup> *An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament* (The International Council of Religious Education), pp. 32, 33.

<sup>6</sup> *Essays Ancient and Modern*. (London: Faber & Faber), p. 96.

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The contrast between the literary and the religious interest is strikingly illustrated by the parts of the Bible which literary men have often praised. Many have been drawn to Job, a magnificent book which is seldom read, and Ecclesiastes, a book which represents neither Judaism nor Christianity. Lafcadio Hearn does not hesitate to say that the Old Testament is superior to the New Testament, and he lists among his favorites the Song of Songs and Esther, two of the most sterile books in the whole collection religiously and morally. In the New Testament he recommends only Revelation, and that not for its meaning, but for its literary grandeur.

Whether one understands the meaning of this mysterious text makes very little difference: the sonority and beauty of its sentences, together with the tremendous character of its imagery, cannot but powerfully influence mind and ear, and thus stimulate literary taste.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly Robert Louis Stevenson railed at the translators of the Revised Version as "absolutely loathsome literary lepers" who deserved an "eternal hell" because he thought they had marred the literary beauty which he had been accustomed to find in the stately King James Version. The fact that they had also made more clear the messages of the original authors did not even interest him.

Such statements seem to present a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* to the idea that the Bible can be expected to survive and to maintain its influence merely as a collection of literature. As well expect Greek mythology to survive in the modern world because it furnished models for beautiful poetry and sculpture. The Bible writes of

<sup>7</sup> Nelson, *op. cit.*, pp. 192-93.

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its heroes as Bunyan wrote of Pilgrim, as Michelangelo sculptured Moses, and as Leonardo pictured the Last Supper, not because they were such good artistic models, but because they had entered into the religious lives of people. And when the religious reality disappears, the artistic expressions of it will cease to have significance except for the antiquarians and the artists.

### *Modern Scholarship and the Bible*

It is just with this point of loss of religious significance that we are concerned. And it is not hard to recognize some of the causes which have worked in that direction. At the lowest level, and deserving only passing comment, has been the unintelligent and superstitious use of the Bible. It has become the only textbook of endless varieties of religious fanatics whose motives are often sincere, but whose noisy expositions of religion and of the Bible have done much to discredit both among saner people.

Along with this may also be mentioned the old proof-text method of using scripture, which most people probably do not analyze to discover its fallacy, but which is discredited by their common sense because of the amazing results which it can produce.

But there have also been some unfortunate results from better and more defensible features of modern Bible study, and these are more serious.

One is the unintended influence of the scholarship which combated the old idea of verbal infallibility. It is an old story, an oft-told tale. When Protestantism broke away from the Mother Church, it based its claims on the authority of the Bible in order to have some re-

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buttal to the Roman Catholic claim of the authority of the church. But an authority must be self-consistent and trustworthy in all its parts, and therefore every part of the Bible must be true. The way was now opened for the familiar bibliolatry. The seventeenth century produced a Protestant scholasticism which was as arid as the scholasticism of the Middle Ages.

In order to have an inerrant scripture, of course the miracle of infallibility had to apply to the translations, since those were the only Bibles which the people actually had, and the resultant superstition is probably best expressed by the old woman who referred to the King James Version as "the Bible as the Holy Spirit dictated it to Saint James." The idea of a verbally inspired, infallible Bible was quite common until recent times, and is probably more widely current even today than we are apt to realize.

Of course the idea could not stand investigation, and it had to be discredited. That is not the point. The point is that the process of disproving such a claim inevitably advertised the fact that the Bible is full of inconsistencies and of prescientific ignorance; and upon the average uncritical man, whether inside the church or outside, the resultant impression has frequently been that the Bible is no longer believable, and is quite out of date.

Of course the Bible is full of contradictions. "Moses then went up . . . and saw the God of Israel. . . . And God did not lay hands on the leaders of the Israelites, but they beheld God." (Exod. 24:10-11.) But the same Bible also says that "no one has ever seen God." (John 1:18.) Both of these cannot be true, and it is quite necessary to point out the different pictures of God in different parts of the Bible. It marks a real advance in

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understanding over the old idea of infallibility. But our interest is now with the man who is in no sense a Bible student, but who hears what is being said about it. It is not hard to imagine that for him the book loses prestige, or even loses interest.

The same effect resulted from the so-called conflict with science, for it is easy to show that the biblical authors believed in a flat earth, a moving sun, a sea of water above the blue sky, and all the rest of the prescientific cosmology. It was in the interest both of truth and also of a better understanding of the Bible that these things should be realized. But again, one of the unfortunate by-products has been that the man who thinks scientifically loses interest in the Bible.

The same thing is true in the realm of conduct. One need only open the Bible and see the things which it says a man should and should not do, to realize that he not only does not live by it, but does not want to live by it, does not think that he ought to live by it, and would feel foolish if he should try. Again, it was in the interest of truth that this be recognized and acknowledged. But again the actual result is the conviction on the part of the twentieth-century citizen that the Bible is irrelevant to life in our age.

We therefore cannot believe all that the Bible says about God, about the world in which we live, and about the best way to live in it. It used to be said that the Bible was "an infallible rule of faith and practice," but we now discover that we no longer believe what it teaches, and we no longer practice what it enjoins upon us.

All this may seem very elementary, and probably it is. But the current widespread neglect of the Bible cannot be tossed aside with the comment that it is familiar to us.

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It seems certain that we have here one of the reasons why people are talking about the Bible's disappearing out of our modern life. The old fight between fundamentalist and modernist—one of whose sins was that it made two splendid adjectives into party labels—had to be fought and won, and it was won. In the long run the destruction of error and the spread of truth must necessarily be good. But the one impression which has been most widely received from the whole incident has been the impression that the Bible no longer matters very much. Our fathers often used the Bible stupidly, but they used it. We have become wiser, and therefore many of us think it unnecessary to use it at all.

Millar Burrows traces this influence even upon the preacher himself:

Modern critical study of the Bible has unquestionably caused confusion and a loss of a sense of the divine authority, thus diminishing the confidence with which a preacher could use the Bible. The result . . . has been a perceptible thinning out of the content of preaching. Listening for the Word of God, the people too often hear only a man's opinions.<sup>3</sup>

We have spoken of the unfortunate result of the liberation of ourselves from fundamentalism and its crude bibliolatry. Another emphasis of modern Bible study, equally justified and much more rewarding to the student, has had a very similar effect upon general Bible reading. It is now a commonplace that the books of the Bible must be read in the light of their own historic settings, and not as though they were written for us. Paul has furnished some splendid texts for modern

<sup>3</sup> *An Outline of Biblical Theology* (Westminster Press), p. 3.

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preaching, but he never intended to. When the ancient prophets warned of the evils that came from the north, and predicted God's punishment upon the north country, they were not providing texts for Southern preachers during the Civil War, even though the texts were used that way. When John wrote of the beast whose number was 666, he did not have Hitler in mind. When Jesus contrasted the abstinence of John the Baptist with his own use of wine, he was not passing judgment on modern temperance reforms.

The writings were for their own days, just as our writings are for our day. In order to understand Paul's white-hot rebuke of the Galatian Christians, we must first understand the Judaizers who were undermining Paul's gospel under the guise of completing it. Christianity as he understood it was at stake, and his right to interpret Christianity as an apostle was being flatly denied, and Paul being Paul, no one would expect him to take such opposition casually. A fight resulted, and in order to understand what Paul had to say about it, we must get back into his world and understand what the fight was about.

The same is true, of course, of all the Bible. In the important seventh chapter of Isaiah the prophet meets King Ahaz at the waterworks of the city of Jerusalem, and delivers a vigorous message from God that the king is not to fear the two tottering kingdoms to the north. Evidently it was a matter of great importance to Isaiah, but no conceivable theory of inspiration can make it mean a thing to us until we reconstruct the political picture and realize that the prophet was speaking to it.

The ancient biblical laws, so many of which we now



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they were fought. The Bible tells about ancient food laws and taboos, but they have no relation to the pressing food problem in our world. The Bible tells about the freeing of slaves in Egypt and their migration to Canaan, but we are interested in the migrations of the homeless and the dispossessed all over the world today, and the possibility of settling them into our economic and political life.

Here we have what is probably the most widespread dissatisfaction with the Bible, even though it is usually unexpressed and often unrealized. It simply is not interesting, and much of it is not understandable, because it speaks from another world. It is undoubtedly as good as it is said to be, but it just cannot be expected to guide us through a world which it never knew.

And here we touch one of the frequent criticisms of religion itself—that it is hopelessly oriented around the past, while everywhere else men are looking for what is latest and best. Medical men are not forever harking back to the teachings of Galen. Engineers are not forever rebuilding the tower of Babel or the pyramids of Egypt. Even art and literature, though they use classic forms as they wish, are not enslaved to them. But religion is thought to have all its authority in the ancient past, and to be committed to the reproduction of that past in all succeeding generations, because its norm and authority are in an ancient literature. As a result, religion is considered not only a conservative but a reactionary force in society, and the popular idea of preachers is colored by the antiquity which they are supposed to serve.

In some instances, of course, this estimate is justified, but how far it is from representing the real religious leadership of our country one need only look around

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him to see. The truth is that our real religious leaders are so far in advance of the present social attitudes and institutions that they are mistrusted because of their radicalism more often than they are ignored as antiquated and irrelevant.

But the popular idea of the Bible survives. It is an indistinct, often unintelligible voice from an almost forgotten past, and it cannot be expected to be a creative and directive force in the present.

More will be said later about the influence which the Bible has had and is having in our civilization. We are interested here in the growing feeling that it is irrelevant, a feeling which is a kind of offshoot of the splendid achievements of recent critical study.

This feeling can be traced into our churches themselves, where again the forces which have been operating have often been good, but have served to decrease our familiarity with and use of the Bible. It is especially true of the developments in our church schools. And here again, as in the destruction of the idea of infallibility and the insistence on the historical approach about which we have been thinking, the movement is in the right direction. Only the effect on the knowledge of the Bible is unfortunate.

A little while back the church school was the Bible school. Its avowed purpose was to teach the Bible. The Bible was its textbook, and it was at least hoped that the pupil would learn something about its contents. Only after the meaning of the text of each lesson had been made plain was the teacher in position to point, sometimes by torturous exposition, such "practical applications" as could be found in it or foisted upon it.

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The educational weaknesses of such a system are familiar, and need not be rehearsed. Even the teaching of the Bible itself, which was the purpose of it all, was pathetically weak. But it did succeed in making the pupil feel the centrality and the importance of the Bible. Whether he learned much about it or not, he knew that it was there, and that in some way perhaps quite vague it was very important to Christian ideas and ideals.

Modern religious education sets as its purpose, not the teaching of a book, but the religious development of the child. The Bible has a place in that development, and it is used. But it is used largely as illustrative material, the central interest being the experiences through which the pupil is going. It is used along with a great deal of other illustrative material, and the pupil does not get the impression that the essential thing is to understand and remember such material. Undoubtedly this is sounder education, and it is doubtless an improvement so far as the effect on the pupil is concerned. But so far as the place of the Bible is concerned, it is one further step toward ignoring it as comparatively unimportant. And the ignorance of even the simple and supposedly familiar Bible stories on the part of the young people in our churches is sometimes breath-taking.

What has been said of our church schools is also largely true of our church services, for these services once centered around the Bible in a way which has now been forgotten. All Sunday morning services had at least one scripture lesson, and many had two, one from each Testament. The truth which the preacher was to preach was supposed to be in these scripture lessons, and since the truths contained in one Testament were supposed to be in the other also, both were read. The New Testa-

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ment, according to the old saying, was implicit in the Old, and the Old Testament was explicit in the New. This, again, led to the most weird expositions of scripture, but at least it guaranteed that the church attendants heard the Bible read every week, and got the very definite idea that it was the central thing in the Christian religion. It is possible that we would be surprised if we could know how many of our people now never hear the Bible read at all.

And further, preaching was supposed to be the interpretation and the application of a text. The preaching was usually more or less related to current issues, but that only meant the Bible was related to current issues. The preacher was the preacher of the Word of God.

Of course the Bible has not disappeared out of our services, but it does not occupy the place of centrality which once it had. Frequently the only reference to the Bible is the responsive reading, which means that no part of the Bible is used, year in and year out, except those few selected passages, and they are so completely taken out of their contexts and scrambled together that one could get no real impression of the contents of the Bible from such usage.

The pastor of a prominent church was recently offering his order of worship to some friends to get their judgment on it. When one commented that there was no use of the Bible in the entire service, he said that he had discussed that with his church officials, and they had decided that by eliminating the scripture reading and saving four minutes they would have a better chance to keep the service within the hour. It is a short step from that to the preacher who had a little difficulty finding a copy of the Bible in his own study, and who, when

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questioned, said that he made little use of it because he had ceased to regard any part of it as authoritative.

The Bible is undoubtedly our greatest English classic. But when one asks how often our people read the Bible or hear it read, one is reminded of the tendency of classics to cease to be contemporary.

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IT IS AN OLD SAYING THAT THE BIBLE MUST BE INSPIRED because otherwise it could never have survived the treatment which it has received from its friends. Probably nothing else in human history has been the object of so much misdirected adulation, which it did not merit, and by which it has been hurt rather than helped. At the risk of repeating much that is very familiar, I want to call attention to some of the popular misuses of the Bible, for they are errors which we must be continually exposing in our generation if the Bible is to be saved from the fanaticism of those who have a zeal which is not according to knowledge, and is to occupy its proper place in our society. Otherwise we may expect our Bible worshipers to continue their superstitious perversions, and what is very much more serious, we may expect the intelligent part of our public to turn away from it entirely, with irritation or with boredom.

Many years ago a prominent leader of young people, speaking to a convention of college students, made a statement about the Bible which may serve as a kind of text. He said that the Bible is "a literary expression of the religious development of the Hebrew people, culminating in the life and teachings of Jesus." This is simple enough, and yet almost every word is a corrective for a common misuse of the Bible which has caused misunderstandings and recriminations among Christian

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people, and has done untold harm to the church of Christ. Let us look at the statement more closely.

### *A Collection of Pamphlets*

First, the Bible is a *literary* expression of this religious development, and not a systematic statement. Many systematic statements of religion have been written, all nicely arranged, logical, and self-consistent. In such a statement there is a section on "The Doctrine of God," and another on "The Divinity of Christ," and another on "The Christian Conception of Man," and many more if one has the patience to go further. And since it is a system, each part must be consistent with every other part, and what the author says on one page must be in accord with what he says on every other page.

We all know such books, and they have great value. But one has only to remind himself of their ponderous scholarship to realize the absence of the academic in our Bible, and of the eternally fresh breezes which continue to refresh us from its deathless literature.

The very name "Bible" is misleading, for it suggests a book as we today know books, and we use singular verbs with it as with any other book. But the Bible is not a book. The word comes to us from the Greek, where it is the plural of the word for "booklet," or "pamphlet," and as long as the church continued to talk Greek it said "The Bible are," not "the Bible is."

The Bible is a collection, a library, made up of pamphlets written over a period of more than a thousand years, much longer than is covered by all the literature which is read by the average man today. These pamphlets were written in three different languages, by

people of different nationalities, representing at least two different religions.

They are a cross section of the literature of these Hebrew people, and as such they contain all sorts of literary types. There is sober prose, and the most fanciful poetry. There are leaden-footed codes of law, and the wildest flights of imagination. There are factual narratives, and primitive legends. There are statements in some of the pamphlets which are flatly denied in others. In fact, one of the fascinating features of this amazing anthology is its diversity, both in content and in literary form.

Let us be fanciful. Suppose that someone should bind together as one book: a life of Augustine, some national pure food laws, some private correspondence, a hymn book, a history of the United States, Phillips Brooks' sermons, Poor Richard's Almanac, the criminal code of the state, a play of Shakespeare's, a prediction of the end of the world, and one of Emerson's essays. Bind these together as one book, and tell people that they should read it through a page at a time because it is the world's greatest masterpiece. The few who might try to read it in this way would soon become discouraged, and if any should stoutly persevere to the end, he would probably claim additional credit just because he had persisted in spite of his mental confusion.



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Of these pamphlets which constitute a cross section of religious literature, of course none was written with the idea that it would ever become "Bible." At least half of them were written before the idea of a Bible ever entered anyone's mind. For it is not necessary that a religion have a Bible. Christianity has one, because it learned from the Jews, and Mohammedanism has its Koran because it learned from both Jew and Christian. But most religions, while they have treasured religious writings, have nothing corresponding to our canonized scriptures. Judaism existed for centuries without a canon, and Christianity existed for generations without any canon except that which it had inherited from Judaism.

So far were these little books from being written as parts of a Bible, that few of them were ever accepted as scripture until long after their authors were dead, and the occasions which had called them forth had retreated into almost forgotten history. Their value had become enhanced by the soft light which hallows the past, and they had been endeared to the people because for generation after generation they had continued to satisfy their religious needs and to speak to them of God. Finally, after many years had made them sacred, they came to be recognized as very Word of God and were enshrined as Holy Scripture.

When the kingdom of Israel had fallen and her people were exiles in Babylonia, the old writings which had told of their glorious past came to have a new meaning for them, and were collected and edited as the Torah, the most important scriptures to the Jews down through the centuries. Later, Jewish prophecy ceased, and it was thought that God no longer spoke to men. Then the old

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prophetic books of the long ago, when God really had talked with his prophets, took on additional significance. They had existed for years, some of them for centuries, but only when they had become mellow with age and familiar with much handling, were they raised to a place in Holy Scripture beside the Torah.

Similarly, the Christian church was satisfied for a long time with the scriptures which it had inherited from Judaism, our Old Testament, though books about Jesus were also read in their services for their inspirational value. But as Jesus and the apostles receded into the past, the literature associated with them became more and more precious to the church, and eventually it, too, was recognized as Word of God and given a place beside the Old Testament as Holy Scripture because the usage of generations had proved its value.

Inclusion of these booklets into a Holy Scripture is therefore the choice made by men of later generations, who for one reason or another chose these particular writings out of their larger literature, because they found in them answers to their questions about God and about life.

Since the assembling of our canon was due to appreciation of the religious messages of books which spoke to the needs of people, it is not surprising that the Jews continued to add to their scriptures from age to age. First, the book of Deuteronomy as the basis for Josiah's reform in the seventh century; then most of the Pentateuch some two centuries later, then later still the prophets, and finally the books of the Hagiographa one after another as each in turn proved its worth to the people. Twenty years after the final destruction of Jerusalem we find their Sanhedrin still arguing about some

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of the books, whether they should be admitted or not, and how long this process of accretion might have gone on, had it not been stopped by the destruction of Jerusalem and the scattering of the people, no one can guess. Throughout the life of Judaism, they were continuously separating out more and more of their books in which they heard the voice of their God speaking.

The formation of our New Testament by the Christian church was not exactly parallel. For a century and a half the early church was collecting the books through which the gospel spoke to them. But there soon arose the artificial test of connection with one of the apostles as a condition for recognition, and with the disappearance of the apostles the New Testament canon was automatically closed, and there has been no thought of adding to it during fifteen centuries.

But while the test of apostolic authorship technically closed the New Testament canon for all time, the Christian church has never felt any desire to add to its scriptures as the Jews did to theirs. Its gospel is Jesus, the climax of all religious development and the completion of God's revelation to men. In the collected booklets of the ages which preceded him, men had heard the Word of God, but now the Word had become flesh and dwelt among them. He is for us the final Word of God, and it seems quite appropriate that the collection of God's revelations should close with the record of his life and his impact upon his early followers.

We speak of fixing the limits of the canon, but even that is an oversimplification, for the process was much more fluid than such language implies. We must remind ourselves again that the Bible was not a book, but a collection of booklets. And since that was long before

the day of modern printing, paper, and bookbinding, our question is not which writings shall be included in one book, bound together, and recognized as Bible. Rather, we have before us a collection of separate rolls, or booklets, and our question is which of these booklets we will recognize as "Word of God."

The result is that there was almost as much difference of opinion as to some of the books as there was agreement for a while. The Jews never did agree as to which books were canonical and which were not, and the Jews who spoke Greek accepted many books which were rejected by the Jews who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic. Paul recognized books as belonging to his Bible which are not in our Protestant Old Testament, and Christians to this day do not agree as to what the Old Testament is, for the Catholic part of Christianity, following Paul and the early church, has books which do not appear in Protestant Bibles.

For a long time Christians did not all recognize the same New Testament. Many of the early fathers have left us their lists of New Testament books, and it was three hundred years after the death of Jesus before we come upon the first list which contains exactly the twenty-seven books which we now know.

All of this is what we should expect when we remind ourselves that we have not been dealing with a book but with a library, an anthology of religious writings produced by the Jewish and Christian churches through the long centuries. We have a cross section of the literature in which they have expressed in varied forms their hopes and their faith, their visions of God and their groping after him in darkness, their insights into truth and their struggles with evil—all the steps along the

long path by which God led them up out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Two corollaries seem to follow from these familiar facts. One is that we should be increasingly careful about quoting the Bible as an authority, as though it were one book. With surprising frequency one hears the expression, "The Bible says . . ." This may be quite innocent if it is a mere matter of literary quotation, but too often it carries an authoritative tone, as though we could cite the Bible as we quote the dictionary, to have the last word in an argument. We still hear the phrase "scriptural Christian," as though it were possible for a Christian, or anybody else, to be scriptural. Because we bind all the books of the Bible between covers and speak of them as a book, we persist in imposing on them a unity which they do not possess. One is perfectly justified in quoting Paul or Isaiah, but not in implying that they are in agreement. We must remember that the Bible teaches life after death and also flatly denies life after death. It teaches that God is righteous and also that he incited people to do evil. It teaches that his servants saw him face to face, and also that "no man hath seen God at any time." Paul says that the Roman Empire was ordained of God, and Revelation says that it was inspired of Satan. Jesus says that some parts of the Bible are not Christian. And yet many still let themselves think that they can live by the Bible, and still try to settle church issues by appeal to its authority.

One notices a revival of this attitude among some modern scholars. As a reaction against the arid criticism referred to in the previous chapter, there is a noticeable tendency to return to the Bible, a tendency which may be both wholesome and welcome. But ever and again it

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betrays weaknesses which result from forgetting what kind of literature the Bible is. Criticism may indeed become arid, but a revived orthodoxy cannot ignore criticism. When it does, it labels as "biblical" teachings which may belong to one author, but may be ignored or even contradicted by other authors, thus claiming the whole biblical tradition for its position. Sin, for instance, has been so enthusiastically rediscovered by some recent writers that one might get the impression that the Bible has nothing to say about man except that he is a sinner, forgetting other parts which emphasize just as strongly his nobility by teaching that he was made in the image of God, a little lower than the angels, that he had the breath of God breathed into his nostrils, and even that the Word of God could become incarnate in man.

The other corollary is that we must increasingly learn to read the Bible by books. The book is the unit. The authors wrote them because they had something to say, just as authors write today. Of course there was no such thing as chapter and verse, and no author had any idea of future canonization, nor of producing clever sentences on which future generations of preachers could hang their sermons. Paul wrote to the Galatians because he had something which he wanted to say to the Galatians. Baruch wrote about the preaching and the experiences of his master Jeremiah because he thought them significant. Until we learn to sit with open minds and quickened imaginations before these worthy men of old and ask them what they are trying to say, we will never catch a glimpse of the things which made other generations sure that they were speaking for God.

## STILL THE BIBLE SPEAKS

### *Pamphlets About Religion*

We have said that the Bible is a collection of little books. If we go back to the statement which is providing us rails on which to run through this chapter, we are reminded that these books are about religion. The Bible is "a literary expression of the *religious* development. . . ."

Nothing could be more trite than to say that the theme of the Bible is religion. It is exactly this religious interest running through it all which gives unity to what is otherwise a collection of the most diverse sort.

But this seems hard for us to remember. Our very veneration for the sacred writings frequently induces us to force them into other uses than those for which they were intended.

It is common, for instance, to praise the Bible as literature, and certainly it is not necessary for us to add more flowers to the bouquet in honor of "our greatest English classic." The more one investigates the influence of our English Bible on English literature, the more amazing the facts are seen to be. Colleges have frequently listed Bible courses in the department of English literature.

But as we saw in the preceding chapter, few if any of the biblical authors ever sat down to write "literature" in the academic sense, as Keats wrote a poem or Emerson an essay. They were writing about religion. And much of the literary value which we so justly prize is not the work of the original authors at all, but of the translators into Elizabethan English.

And those who finally chose these books for preservation out of the larger literature of their people did not attempt to pick out masterpieces on the basis of literary

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excellence. The authors were writing about God and his dealings with men, and the church canonized books because they enshrined the religious experience of the ages.

What is true of the Bible as literature is also true of the Bible as history. It is naturally treasured because of its priceless historical information. Teachers sometimes justify themselves for teaching it "for the facts," as objective history. And many of its lovers have turned with almost pathetic eagerness to each new find in archaeology to discover some further evidence of its historical accuracy.

But the biblical authors were not interested primarily in history. Even those books which we list as historic, such as Kings or Acts, are not interested in history for history's sake. There is almost no history recorded except as it relates to religion. Those books are really sermons, using history as a preacher today might use historic developments to explain the unfolding purposes of God. And just as the authors were not historians, so the church in canonizing these books was not interested in perpetuating the mere knowledge of facts about how long Jeroboam reigned or where Paul went next after he left the last place.

We may even go further, and say that the facts are just the reverse. The Bible is not valuable for its history; the history is valuable only for the light it throws on the religion in which the Bible is interested. Aside from their significance for the eternal revelation of God, we today would know and care no more about the incidents in the history of ancient Israel than we now do about the history of the Philistines or the Chaldeans.

Errors of detail are constantly being found in the



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biblical narratives, which matters not at all. There is no more reason why a preacher in those days should be infallible in historic details than there is today.

But the worst combination of high comedy and pathetic tragedy came when the Bible was allowed to invade the field of the sciences, where of course it never belonged and about which it has nothing to say. Much has been said about the conflict between science and religion, a chapter in the history of the church which all her lovers are glad to hurry past in silence. There is no need to review the familiar and discreditable story here, except to call attention to the fact that it never was a "warfare between science and religion," but merely a warfare carried on by misguided religionists because the findings of the sciences were not contained in the Bible. The conflict was between the interpretation of the physical world by prescientific man and that of the scientists, and the church had the bad judgment to side with primitive man. The entire episode was possible only because men were not satisfied to let the Bible talk about religion, and sought to make it also a textbook on things in general.

Galileo was a Christian, and had no more idea of attacking religion than has any present-day astronomer. But getting the idea from a pair of spectacles, he made his little telescope, and eventually he was teaching that the earth was round, and that it revolved around the sun.

Evidently there was nothing in this inconsistent with religion. But it was inconsistent with the Bible, for there is nothing easier to prove from the Bible than that the earth is flat, and that the sun rises and sets. How else could it have stood still for Joshua? So the battle was on,

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and the religionists declared that it was possible to be Christian on a flat earth, but that if the earth should be proved round, it would destroy the faith.

They were wrong. After some practice people learned to be Christian on a round earth about as effectively as their fathers had when it was still flat. But the battle was not won, because the attitude toward the Bible was not changed. It was merely transferred to another battlefield. After the astronomer came the geologist, who dug up some stones and fossils and began to talk in terms of geologic ages.

Again religionists became hysterical, but the issue had nothing to do with religion. They were now trying to use the Bible as a textbook in geology, or at least in chronology. And the Bible knows nothing about geologic ages. Bishop Usher, a younger contemporary of Galileo, had proved, by adding together the length of the kings' reigns, the ages of the patriarchs, and other Old Testament dates, that the world had been created in 4004 B.C. That fight was so recent that we can still remember the thunder of its departing storm, when some church papers were challenging us to choose between the ages of rock and the Rock of Ages! And the whole unfortunate episode was due to the fact that people would not let the Bible be a book about religion.

After people had practiced for some time being Christian on an earth which was several million years old, the same fight broke out anew on still another battlefield, for still we had not learned how to use the Bible and how not to use it. After the astronomer and the geologist came the biologist. And the recent excitement about evolution had nothing more to do with religion than had the previous foolish struggles. The biologists seemed

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to find that God had made man in the only way in which God has been found making anything, by creating something better out of something not so good. It was, of course, a vastly more inspiring conception of God and of the possibilities of the human race than had ever been dreamed before, but that was not the point. There were no biologists back in Bible times, and so the Bible did not teach it. Those who remember Mr. Bryan's attempt to disprove evolution will recall that his arguments revolved almost entirely around the biblical teaching, and that he was therefore quickly forced into having to defend the scientific accuracy of the whole Bible. One wonders how much bitterness and recrimination would have been avoided if the attempt had never been made, and we had all been content to realize that the Bible is a book about religion.

All this is an old story, but even yet the lesson has been only partly learned. It might be amusing, but it would also be wearisome to list more modern uses of the Bible for purposes for which it was never intended. It has predicted Hitler, foretold the collapse of this world, and described the atomic bomb. The list is long—and humiliating. Sensible people are not interested, and that is just our concern. We are not worried about the uninformed people who insist on keeping their scientific ideas on prescientific levels. Fortunately God can save people in spite of a great deal of ignorance. But for the others, the result is all too frequently not a more intelligent use of the Bible. Instead, too many intelligent people have been moved to ignore it with a mixture of contempt and boredom. The successive retreats on many battlefields have led to final retreat for many, and the Bible is felt to be out of date.

*A Growing Religion*

We have seen that the Bible is a collection of literature, and that it is concerned with religion. But the next word in the statement which we are following also brings us to attention, for it, too, is a corrective for an immense misuse of the Bible, present as well as past. The Bible is the literary expression of religious *development*.

If there has been development within the Bible, obviously it cannot all be on the same level, or in other words, it cannot all be Christian. Leaving to one side all questions of science and of history, with which the Bible is not concerned, and limiting ourselves to the one thing which is its province and for which it exists, we still cannot treat it as authoritative or Christian throughout.

Many causes have contributed to the widespread idea that the Bible can be quoted as the last word in religion. One is the very fact to which we have previously referred, that the Bible is printed and bound as one book. It has been called "a lamp to our feet and a light to our pathway," as though it cast one steady and unflinching beam along the way of life. It has been idealized as "the infallible rule of faith and practice," as though every idea which it teaches and every type of conduct which it admonishes were infallible. Of course most people would repudiate such conceptions when stated baldly, but long habits of thought are hard to outgrow, and in their thinking people continue to surround the Bible with such an atmosphere, and when it suits their purpose in argument, they use it in such a way.

Old ideas of inspiration, which Christianity inherited from Judaism, still have their influence on the popular mind. The Bible is the word of God, the revelation of

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God. On it all churches claim to be based. It is used whenever a message from God is wanted in human affairs, as in sick rooms or in the presence of death, and part of the effectiveness is due not to the contents of the message, but to the fact that it is Bible. Preachers pledge themselves in ordination to preach the word of God. It seems a bit incongruous in the midst of such usage to say that even in the realm of religion much of it is below the level of Christianity.

The same unrealistic attitude is probably fostered by our custom of preaching from texts on Sundays and using lessons from the Bible in our church schools. The very custom of having a text of scripture for each sermon, a custom which is good in so many practical ways, had its origin in earlier ideas of biblical infallibility and authority. The function of the preacher was not to express his own ideas about things in general, but to read and expound the Word, the assumption being that if it was in the Word, it was true Christianity.

As a result, the people are satisfied if the text is taken from between the covers of the book. It may be from John or Jeremiah or Jude, from Luke or Lamentations or Leviticus. But so long as it is from the Bible it is a proper basis for the preaching of Christianity. A preacher once took as his text a saying of Satan in the book of Job, and neither he nor his congregation seemed to see any incongruity since it was from the Scriptures.

This has resulted in a queer inconsistency on the part of Christians toward Jews. Because the writings of Jews before the coming of Christ are in our Bible, and because the Bible is Christian, we have admitted all Jews before Christ into the Christian communion. We preach Christianity on the basis of Moses or David or Isaiah, and

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hold up those characters in our church schools as heroes of the faith. But all Jews since the birth of Christ are definitely on the outside, in spite of the fact that many of them represent a higher and more Christlike level of religion and morals than was dreamed of by their patriarchal ancestors.

The simple fact is that these little booklets are not on the same level, and it would help to clear the air if we should accustom ourselves to saying so. They record a development. The significant thing about those Hebrew people was not that while all the rest of the world was down on a level of pagan superstition and immorality, they were up on a high level where they could produce eternally valid Christian standards. Rather, the significant thing was that while they were down on the same level as their neighbors, God could reach down to them and patiently, through the centuries, bring them up to a position where they could produce a Jesus and a Paul.

It would be interesting to trace the origin of this stubborn idea that all the Bible is Christian. Even the ancient Jews, believing as they did that all their scriptures were inspired, never thought that they were all on the same level. They always considered their Torah superior to all other scriptures, and even within the Torah they recognized that some laws took precedence over others.

Jesus knew and loved his scriptures as few others have loved them. His thought and his vocabulary were steeped in them, and his whole message claimed to be in fulfillment of them. But it never occurred to him that they were all on a Christian level. Over and over he called attention to unchristian teachings. It had been said by

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them of old times, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," but his followers were not to live in any such way. The Scriptures had much to say about what foods could be eaten and what could not, but Jesus brushed it all aside with the statement that what entered the mouth made no difference. He remembered that Moses had provided for divorces, but he was quite sure that it was not what God had intended in the first place.

We may not stop to discuss the thoroughgoing attitude of Paul, who taught that anyone who thought that he must keep the law made Christ of none effect, or in other words, made himself something other than a Christian. Coming to Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, a biblical scholar who knew and loved his Bible, we find him repudiating whole books of scripture. Of Esther he said, "I am so hostile to this book that I wish it did not exist, for it Judaizes too much, and has too much heathen naughtiness." And the New Testament book of James he brushed aside as a mere epistle of straw.

To cite but one other of the founding fathers of Protestantism, John Wesley knew and loved his scriptures, and his translation of the New Testament from the Greek anticipated many of the improvements of more recent versions. But it never occurred to Wesley that all the Bible was Christian. He said that some of the psalms ought never to be taken on a Christian's lips, and anyone who reads some of the psalms will share his estimate of them. A Christian's tongue would cleave to the roof of his mouth if he should try seriously to pray as a psalmist prayed about a personal enemy:

Appoint thou a wicked man over him;  
And may Satan stand at his right hand!

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When he is put on trial may he come forth guilty;  
And may his prayer become a sin!  
May his days be few!  
Let another take his office!  
May his children become fatherless,  
And his wife a widow!  
May his children wander about and beg;  
And may they be expelled from their hovels. (Ps. 109:8-10.)

The danger is not that people will accept all the Bible as the standard for their own conduct. There may be a few fanatics who actually try to live by all of it, but their number is negligible. The real danger is that they will accept the Bible as the official interpretation of Christianity, and therefore throw the whole thing overboard. Our colleges abound in young people who are quite ready to contrast their own ethical standards with those of the Bible, to the discredit of the latter. If the Bible exalts the kind of God who demanded the total destruction of the Amalekites, and if it accepts all the prescientific world view of primitive times and looks for the fulfillment of all the fanciful predictions of Revelation, then the modern man feels he just cannot be bothered with it. He may respect it as a venerable relic of antiquity which must once have served a good purpose, and which undoubtedly has much that is still good hidden away in masses of material that is irrelevant. He may even have a certain reverence for it as a symbol of that which is holy—and rather mysterious. But it will not occur to him that he can integrate his life around it. He will not go to it for the workaday principles around which he must order his daily living, nor accept it as revealing the standards by which all life must be measured. Only as we can teach our people to read the Bible



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as the record of a religious development from the not-so-good to the altogether perfect will its various parts fall into their proper places and the whole stand out in its glorious unity.

### *Culminating in Jesus*

The church would have saved itself a great deal of confusion if it had always insisted that it was Christian. It was not founded on the patriarchs nor on Moses, but on Jesus. It recognizes as its authority, not the Bible, but Christ. Its initial sense of direction and its initial spiritual impulse were derived from him. For the first Christians, Christ was the meaning of all history, both past and future, the culmination of all revelation, the hope of the world. God, who had little by little and in different ways spoken in olden times through the prophets, had in these latter days spoken in his Son. Many of the ancients had caught glimpses of God and had immortalized them in their writings, but in Christ all the fullness of God's nature lived embodied. The church exists only that it may be the body of Christ, through which he continues to make himself felt in the world.

From the Christian point of view, Jesus is the reason for the Old Testament. This, of course, was not true of the Jews who collected the Old Testament and gave it to the Christian church, but as soon as the Christians received it, they began to interpret it in terms of Jesus, because for them everything must be interpreted in terms of Jesus. The resulting exegesis was fearfully and wonderfully made, and we have had difficulty freeing ourselves from some of it. But in spite of its bad exegesis, the church was true to its genius when, finding itself in possession of the ready-made scriptures of Judaism, it

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insisted that they be brought into relation to its Lord Christ.

All the Old Testament looked to the future, as the author of Hebrews says in his own peculiar way. With all of its revelations of God, the Old Testament was still looking for a final revelation. It was a story without an end, which may have some relation to the fact that Judaism continued to add new books to its canon. But the Christian church had that for which all else was preparation, and the Old Testament was now seen as the long and sometimes discouraging road by which God had brought his people up to his final revelation in Christ. Aside from Christianity, the Old Testament would be comparatively unknown to the world today, for it would be the private monopoly of the Jews, and the rest of the world would have little interest in it. The scriptures of the Jews became the possession of the race when they came to be associated with Jesus.

When we pass to the New Testament, of course the centrality of Christ is much more obvious. The Gospels were preserved because they contained the gospel. Long before anyone ever thought of a New Testament canon, before they were concerned about the books and their authorship and inspiration, Christians were accustomed to read in their services some word about their Lord. It was Christ who was the authority, not the books which told about him. The epistles were collected and cherished because they had been written by the apostles, who had been Christ's missionaries and who could represent him with authority. The apocalypse appropriately closes the canon with the prediction of the final overthrow of Christ's enemies and his triumphant reign. Aside from Christ, no New Testament would ever have been writ-

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ten. And since he was the culmination of all revelation, there has been no thought of adding anything to the New Testament down through the ages.

Christ, then, is the authority for Christians. The ways in which that authority may be appealed to must be discussed later. Here we are insisting that the Christian appeal must be, not to the Bible, but to Christ. If we would know whether idea or action is Christian, it is not enough to find it in the Bible. It must be brought into the clear light which shines from the face of Jesus, to see how it looks there. Moses and Paul must themselves be tested by Jesus before we can know which of their teachings are Christian.

The church has taught doctrines which by this test are not Christian. Most doctrines of atonement, for instance, would collapse if tested by the simple story of the prodigal son, where the father does not crack the door before letting the repentant son into the house, and ask first of all who is going to pay his debts or who will bear his punishment for him, but welcomes him with ecstasy on the sole basis of his repentance and his desire to return to his father's house.

Likewise, the church has taught standards of conduct which have little resemblance to the ideals of Jesus. Passing over inquisitions and persecutions in the name of Christ, one finds very little support in Jesus for the whole ascetic type of virtue which invaded the church from farther East, and which has made its influence felt for centuries. It is based on a fundamental denial of life, while Jesus believed in the essential goodness of life, and came that men might have it abundantly.

And the church has sanctioned types of religious experience which have very little resemblance to the reli-

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gious experiences of Jesus. It is possible to have deep appreciation for the place of emotion in any real religion, and still to realize that Jesus never measured religion by the feelings as has been done so often in his name. His word is not "Then are ye my disciples, if ye feel. . . ." One doubts whether Jesus himself ever had anything resembling what many people have called "an experience of religion."

#### *Revelation in the Process*

The Bible, then, is "the literary expression of the religious development of the Hebrew people, culminating in the life and teachings of Jesus." But a question remains. If Jesus is the culmination of the process, and if all the rest must be tested by its harmony with him, then why not keep Jesus and let the rest go? Do we not multiply confusion by holding on to various elements which are confessedly inconsistent? We have been urged to "concentrate on the goal of the development, rather than study the history of the development." Jesus would stand out in clearer light, so it is claimed, if he were not bound in the same volume with the imprecatory psalms.

And it is readily acknowledged that it would be easy to select individual passages which could be lost from the Bible without serious ill effects. In fact, few people would ever discover that they had been lost. But when one speaks of "concentrating on the goal of the development" and limiting ourselves to Jesus as the Christian norm, he is certainly forgetting the independent and intrinsic worth of much that he would sacrifice. Few people would want to lose from their Bible the twenty-third psalm, or the ten Commandments, or the first chapter of Isaiah, or the Daniel stories, to choose quite at

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random. Such passages stand on their own feet in the literature of the world, and we would be incalculably poorer without them.

And further, it is a truism that even Jesus himself would not be intelligible to us if we did not have his background in the Old Testament. It is more evident today than it has ever been before that lives, no more than flowers, can be adequately understood apart from the soils which have produced them. Jesus himself would certainly have been surprised by the idea that anyone would understand his message who did not know his scriptures.

But more often the suggestion of an abridged Bible is made in a less drastic form. If some parts are confessedly below the Christian level, then why not revise the Bible to make it include only those parts which have value for us today? Why retain teachings which we do not want people to accept and examples which we do not want them to follow? It must be confessed that the extermination of the Amalekites, for instance, has been a stumbling block for many Christians.

Probably this suggestion is made most often by young people, and especially by college students in Bible classes who are confused by some parts of the Bible which they are meeting for the first time.

But this is to misunderstand the nature of revelation. Revelation is not something absolute and ultimate, standing over against life. It is not a final code of conduct to be followed. The purpose of revelation is not to answer for all time what I should think and how I should act, thus reducing life to an unvarying uniformity. And it is here that so many seem to be confused. They want a trustworthy road map on which they can depend to

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tell them where to drive, which corners to turn, when to go, and when to stop. Or, to change the figure, they want a blueprint which they can follow, step by step, in building their lives.

But the revelation of God is not an objective, final model to be reproduced. Revelation is in the process itself. God is in history, moving it forward as fast as man will respond to the pressure of his Spirit. No stage of this process, however primitive, is without God, and no stage, however advanced, fully reaches his goal. And even a perfect response to God would be perfect only under the given circumstances, and would have to be continuously reinterpreted for continuously changing life situations.

The tourist sees the road as a series of stretches, each ending with the next curve. But to the person looking down on it from a height, the road is seen to be one unit, moving forward to a distant destination, and no section of it is intelligible apart from its relation to all the rest. Jesus has given us a sense of direction, and a new power to follow it, and we are continuing to see the unfolding revelation of God, whose principles are applied in constantly new ways in a constantly changing society.

Explain it as we will, God took the Hebrew people when they were on the level of primitive paganism, and he has continuously revealed his righteousness and his power in ever higher forms as he has led them along the way.

A college girl once asked Charles Foster Kent where the Bible "began to be believable." She knew there were some early stories which she could not accept, and some other parts which were sober truth, and she wanted to

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draw a line in her Bible separating the two and indicating where it began to be worthy of acceptance. Professor Kent's answer was, "It begins to be believable at the first word of the first verse." But he explained that we must understand what the Bible is trying to tell us.

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IN OUR FIRST CHAPTER WE FACED THE FACT THAT A SURPRISING percentage of our population, even of the members of our churches, has very little contact with the Bible. And since this seems to be especially true among the young people, it augurs ill for the place of the Bible in the tomorrows which are ahead of us. In the second chapter we noticed some of the ill-advised misuses of the Bible which, if they are continued, will lower the esteem which thoughtful people will have for the great classic.

### *The Bible Hard to Read*

But it would be an inexcusable blunder if we should imagine that we need only to recognize the danger in order to correct it. For the Bible will never be read simply because people are told that it is their duty to read it. It is not that simple. Even religious people will not start reading their Bibles, and then continue it as a life habit, just because they should, as they brush their teeth or pay their taxes.

The Bible is hard to read. Mortimer J. Adler has said:

The problem of reading the Holy Book—if you have faith that it is the Word of God—is the most difficult problem in the whole field of reading. There have been more books written about how to read Scripture than about all other aspects of the art of reading together.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mortimer Adler, *How to Read a Book* (Simon & Schuster), p. 288.

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And here we must be careful not to ignore the warning which has been emphasized above, that we must not generalize as though the Bible were one book, all on one level. Some parts of it are not hard to understand and to appreciate. They make a universal appeal, and one responds to them instantly and spontaneously, as one responds to a beautiful face or a gorgeous sunset or exquisite music. The study of technical details may add to the measure of appreciation, as the artist understands the blending of colors which produces the effect, and the musician analyzes the structure of the music. But appreciation does not wait upon such technical knowledge. The common people hear it gladly. C. W. Votaw opens his scholarly study of the Sermon on the Mount with the statement:

The message of Jesus to men contained in the Sermon on the Mount can be essentially understood, and is valid and useful, apart from the historical, literary, and exegetical questions concerning it. . . . The words of Jesus in this Sermon present an ideal of human life. . . which has been and is intuitively recognized as the highest standard of life yet conceived. . . . They need not so much to be explained by men as to be appreciated, accepted, and lived by them.<sup>2</sup>

One need add few words of explanation to the broken-hearted penitence of the fifty-first psalm or to the unfailing comfort of the twenty-third, to the love which never fails in the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians or to the epitome of the gospel in John 3:16. One doubts whether good sermons are often preached on such passages, for the texts have already spoken so directly and

<sup>2</sup> Hastings, *A Dictionary of Bible* (Charles Scribner's Sons), extra vol., p. 1.

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so intimately to the hearts of the people that there is not much left for the preacher to say. It is the high privilege of the preacher to see that his people are familiar with those parts of the Bible which can meet them at the points of need in their daily living, and minister to them as messages from God.

A second and possibly a larger classification is made up of those parts of the Bible which have something to say to us, but whose messages wait for their appreciation upon the explanation of the historical or literary difficulties which obscure them to the average reader. Illustrations abound. Almost the entire field of Old Testament prophecy would fall within this class, and in the New Testament a large part of the Pauline writings. In both cases the writings are so closely related to the situations which occasioned them that a knowledge of the historic settings must often furnish a key to the understanding of the messages.

Amos denounced worship, Jeremiah urged his people to surrender to the enemy, and Paul disavowed all obligation to laws of the Bible. Each had his reasons, and his reasons were good, but the modern reader will scarcely appreciate what was involved without some guidance. The constantly increasing number of books about the Bible is a testimony that many things need to be said about it if it is to deliver its full message after the passing of many centuries.

Professor Bower truly says that

the Bible is by no means as simple a book as the great mass of its readers assume it to be. It is the outgrowth of a complex social movement and is as complex as the social process out of which it emerged. [An intelligent reading of

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it] involves an understanding of the fundamental process and results of literary criticism.\*

If this is beyond the grasp of the average reader, then the average reader will never understand most of his Bible.

In addition to the passages of obvious beauty and the other sections which need to be interpreted and placed in their proper setting before they can shed any light, there is the third class which has no light to shed, except to the antiquarian and the historian. For we gain nothing by refusing to admit that many parts of the Bible have no message for us today, whatever may have been true in their own generations. Praising them because they chance to be bound up with other more lively writings leads only to confusion. Much scholarship is expended on them, but one suspects that it is in part because of the company they keep rather than because of their own intrinsic worth. One doubts whether many commentaries would ever have been written on Leviticus, for instance, if it had existed alone, and had not had the good fortune to be associated with sixty-five other books most of which are much more significant. Mary Ellen Chase, writing for "the common reader," says that "many portions, especially of the Old Testament, have now little meaning or value save to the theologian or the scholar,"<sup>4</sup> and she omits many books from her treatment.

### *Spiritual Distance*

These three classifications, though of course they are not rigidly distinct, remind us again that the Bible is

\* W. C. Bower, *The Living Bible* (Harper & Bros.), pp. 161-162.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Ellen Chase, *The Bible and the Common Reader* (Mac-Millan), p. 10.

a collection of very different types of literature. But there are other difficulties in the way of an intelligent appreciation which apply to all the books, and against which the reader is constantly struggling, whether he is aware of it or not.

One of these is what Paul Sevier Minear calls the "spiritual distance" between author and reader. It is difficult for us ever to get the exact viewpoint of anyone else. Even in the same family the parent has difficulty seeing things as they appear to the child. Only to a limited degree can we see through the eyes of intimate friends, and the experiences which they describe with tingling excitement leave us only lukewarm. And this inability to share the other viewpoint increases with geometric progression as we get farther apart. How many white people can feel what the Negro feels in our segregated society, or how many Westerners can look through the eyes of the Oriental, or how many moderns can share the ancients' outlook on life?

When we read the Bible, the "spiritual distance" is at a maximum. We are modern, and it is very ancient. We are Western, and it is Oriental. We are Gentiles, and most of it is proudly Jewish. Who would be so bold as to say that he knows just how Jeremiah felt, or that he can make Paul's thoughts and experiences real to himself? Always, as we read those ancient records from a world long gone, we are striving to wipe out the centuries and live in those strange times. And at best we can never fully succeed.

We are reading to share experiences, and not merely to collect facts nor to perpetuate ideas. And this leads to a second difficulty. Collecting facts is not so difficult. We can do that like an adding machine adds up figures.

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Only patience and memory are necessary. And we can correct our ideas by logical thinking and constant checking against evidence. But the purpose of the Bible is not primarily to do either of these things, but to share experiences, and this is possible only when heart can speak to heart in a spiritual oneness which makes understanding possible.

To an extent this aids us in overcoming the handicap of time, for the deep experiences of life remain much the same from age to age. Stark fear, mother love, hate, hope, reverence, love, despair,—these are much the same for us as they were for primitive man, though our thoughts about them and the things which stimulate them are ever changing. We can therefore share the experiences of prescientific men even though their explanations of things seem crude, their earth is flat, their time is fore-shortened, their God anthropomorphic.

But this does not mean that it is easy. It means rather that we must ourselves be artists if we would appreciate art, and we must have a degree of sainthood in ourselves if we would hold communion with the saints. John Dewey writes of *Art As Experience*, and the very title is suggestive. The only thing I can do with art is to experience it. The artist, be he writer or painter or musician, can only show me what he has experienced, with the hope that I will be artist enough to share it with him. When some tourists were criticizing a bit too boisterously the pictures in a European gallery, the caretaker quietly commented, "These pictures are no longer on probation; only the visitors are." When one is confronted by the biblical writers whose experiences and insights have spoken to millions of men and women down through the ages, then he is on trial, to see whether there is in his

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soul that which can respond to the depths in their souls.

Handel can show us through his music what he saw when, on completing the "Hallelujah Chorus," he said with tears running down his cheeks, "I did think I did see all heaven before me, and the great God himself!" But we, too, must be able to see the great God. Otherwise he will be saying nothing that he wants to say. It is an old story told of Turner—and it is also told of other artists—that when a woman said that she could not see in a sunset all that he had put on a canvas, he replied, "But don't you wish you could!"

We are too prone to think that religion consists of holding right ideas about religious matters. We draw up a set of accepted opinions, call it a creed, and naively assume that it contains the essence of our religion. But right ideas, while they have a place, are neither the beginning nor the end of religion. The ten-year-old knows what love is. He has learned the dictionary definition, and in addition he has watched it in action, and he knows that it makes big brother awfully silly. But some day it will come to him, and then he will not need a definition, and the silliness will be divine. But the point is that until it does come to him as experience, no amount of description or definition can make him feel it, and when it does come, the definition is unnecessary.

So it is with reading the Bible. It has been saved for us because it contains the work of geniuses. As a matter of fact, Handel compared his inspiration to that of Isaiah. But people cannot be made to appreciate or enjoy the work of geniuses merely by moral compulsion. The man who has not a musical training cannot be forced to enjoy Wagner as a duty; the man who has been trained can



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never hear him often enough, and each time he hears him the richness of the experience is increased.

People have ideas about life after death from their childhood, but when loved ones slip from sight, and they are thrown in anguish upon their faith to see whether it is adequate for such a crisis, then they turn with new understanding to the Genius who could say, "Your minds must not be troubled; you must believe in God, and believe in me. There are many rooms in my Father's house; if there were not, I would have told you, for I am going away to make ready a place for you. And if I go and make it ready, I will come back and take you with me, so that you may be where I am." (John 14:1-3) And then for the first time does one hear across the centuries as Paul closes his long discussion of the Resurrection with the triumphant shout, "But thank God! He gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Cor. 15:57) One must walk through sorrow to read such passages.

And so it is with other passages which have messages for us. One must qualify through bitter moral struggle and defeat to be able to read Paul's great confession, "We know that the Law is spiritual, but I am physical, sold into slavery to sin. I do not understand what I am doing, for I do not do what I want to do; I do things that I hate. . . . It is not I that do these things; it is sin, which has possession of me." (Rom. 7:14-17.)

It is easy for us to learn the words of the psalmist, but it is not so easy to share his experience as his heart bursts into ecstatic song:

Bless the Lord, O my spirit;  
Let my whole being bless his holy name! (Ps. 103:1.)

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We read with easy indifference that God spoke to one or another of his prophets, but what they are trying to describe is that awful sense of divine compulsion which often tore a man's life to shreds, and drove him almost to the point of death.

To the ancient poet the heavens declared the glory of God, but to how many of us today do they declare only majestic celestial mechanics! There is a sob in the prayer of that awful, lonely night, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." But it will escape the notice of the man who is accustomed to measuring success in terms of wealth and security.

They have painted for us their experiences, the good and the bad. They have left us as a heritage the record of their insights, their thoughts, their struggles, their joys, their failures, as they responded in their ways to the leadings of the spirit of God. And we enter into our heritage when in some measure we can know what they have known and feel what they have felt. This must have been what Coleridge meant when he said that the Bible reached him at a greater depth than any other book.

And here, one suspects, is the greatest difficulty in reading the Bible, for it is a difficulty which can be overcome not by study or by explanation, but only by experience in living. And we live in such a different world! Our scale of values is different; our ambitions and our ideas of success, our interpretations of ourselves and of the world around us are different. We live in a world of paganism. It is frequently nice, cultured, refined, attractive paganism, but none the less it is centered in ourselves and things and not in God, and therefore it is pagan. And the world of the Bible and the experiences of those who lived in it are therefore strange to us. The

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Bible is not neglected because it is "so old and familiar." Rather, it is so strange that we are not at home in it.

Possibly our age does not differ from earlier ages at this point as much as we think. Maybe the majority of men at all times have been concerned chiefly with their own little possessions and their own passing pleasures. But such men did not write our Bible. Many of our biblical authors were strange to their own times, and were repudiated by their contemporaries. Nothing is more fundamentally true of the Bible than that it confronts men with a God-centered interpretation of our world and of our own lives, and few people have learned to feel at home in a God-centered world.

### *God at the Center*

Strictly speaking, the Bible is not concerned with religion, but with God. The word "religion" occurs in only three or four passages in the entire sixty-six books, but one is confronted with God throughout. There is very little concern for the fostering of religion as an institution except in the priesthood of the Old Testament, which is its least significant part. But from beginning to end one is challenged to come to terms with a divine Person, from whom all value and all meaning derive. Man can organize religion, but he cannot organize God. He can only come face to face with him, and surrender. Man can manipulate religion to his own advantage, but he cannot manipulate God. He can only bow in a consciousness of his unworthiness, and say, "Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever."

It will be instructive if we remind ourselves of the

way in which our authors, differing as they do in so many ways, unite in interpreting all life in terms of God.

The early stories tell of the beginnings of things, and there is but one answer to all the questions. They began with God. Whether it is the beginning of the world or of the animals and plants which inhabit it, it is enough to know that God created them for his purpose. The beginnings of rainbow and of circumcision, of different languages and of different nationalities, the choice of the patriarchs and the creation of Israel's covenant, the crossing of the Red Sea out of Egypt and of the Jordan into Canaan—all of it was simply God. When the Israelite looked at the world around him, he saw God, and when he strained his eyes into the remote past, he could see no farther than the God who was the source of it all.

The same was true, of course, of the whole prophetic movement. Of all the prophets of Israel, the one fundamental fact was that they were under pressure from God. Most of them were what we today would call laymen, for the priests, not the prophets, constituted the ordained clergy. They had no fixed religious traditions or institutions to perpetuate. But "when the Lord God speaks, who will not prophesy?" (Amos 3:8.) Amos insists that he is no ecclesiastic, but a farmer, but "the Lord took me from behind the flock, and the Lord said unto me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'" (Amos 7:15.)

We think of those old prophets as men of distinction and honor, and such in a sense they were, but to them it was an unwelcome task. More than one plead with God to be excused from it, and submitted only under divine compulsion. Their treatment by their contemporaries inspired the proverb that the fathers killed the prophets and their children built monuments to them.

They must have seemed a queer lot, and sometimes quite unattractive. But through them God was in constant touch with his people, correcting their mistakes and determining their policies.

Naturally the devotional literature relates all experiences to God. Hope or fear, joy or sorrow, frustration or salvation, all look Godward. It sounds so natural to hear the psalmist saying, "Thou hast been my hope, O Lord God. . . . Thou art my strong refuge," (Ps. 71:5, 7) that we do not stop to realize that this is not the language of today. We have really developed two languages, one for dealing with life religiously in church and the other for dealing with life in a secular way outside of church.

The situation with regard to wisdom literature is interesting, for wisdom was naturally secular. Among many peoples we find this form of distilled common sense, based on experience and observation. Using the experience of the race as a kind of laboratory, the sage teaches the youth what kinds of conduct work out well and what ill. There is no inherent need for God. Wisdom is justified by its results, and the wise man is he who follows the type of conduct which will work to his benefit.

There is some secular wisdom of this type in the Old Testament. But the teaching of the sage could not stay on this level in Judaism, for like everything else, it must be brought within the area of God's activity. And so we soon read, not of results which follow inevitably from conduct, but of results which God sends as rewards or punishments, and the fear of the Lord becomes the foundation of wisdom.

To mention only one other type of biblical literature, apocalypticism bases all hope for a better world, all faith in the triumph of good over evil, in God. De-

spairing of man's feeble efforts in a hopeless and frustrated world, it bids him wait to see the salvation of his God, for it is the Father's good pleasure to give him the kingdom. If the world is to be made better, God must make it so.

History, laws, social customs, political institutions, personal conduct, all have meaning because of God. The explanation of the past and the hope of the future are alike in God. The Bible record starts when God places innocent man in a garden; it closes when God fills a heavenly city with redeemed men. God is so completely the hero of the Bible that we take it for granted as we read the old familiar pages, and when we close the book and move out into our contemporary world we realize with something of a shock how the atmosphere has changed.

For modern man does not think of God as the explanation of history, the source of his laws, the determiner of his social customs, the founder of his political institutions, nor even in any very definite way the standard of his personal conduct. Religion, so far as he is concerned with religion, is one interest along with others, like music, or sports, or stamp collecting. Each interest has its own place, is subject to its own techniques, and demands a certain amount of time for its cultivation, and each one, like electives in college, is chosen by some people and not by others.

But the authors of the Bible knew nothing of any such pigeonholed religion. For them, in spite of their differences in other respects, the ultimate fact of *all* life was God. One's attitude toward God was not one interest along with others. It was the primary orientation of all life, in relation to which everything else came to have



meaning. Criminal law was as truly God's concern as ecclesiastical law. The prophets talked as much about what we call politics as about what we call religion. God created physical life as truly as he created spiritual life, and he was as interested in the one as in the other. This was for them God's world, and men must learn how God wanted them to live in it. This was what John Macmurray meant when he said that "the ancient Hebrews present us with the only example in history of a specifically religious civilization."<sup>5</sup>

## *Functional Religion*

Here we meet one of the fundamental differences in outlook which make the Bible seem so unreal to us in spite of our familiarity with its words. For the Bible, man's task was to adjust himself to God in order to live in God's world, and this meant repentance and righteousness. For us, on the other hand, since all life is man-centered, religion justifies itself if it can be made to serve man's ends.

We speak of "functional religion," and we measure it by the way in which it functions in its social environment. And religion will function—tremendously. History has proved that. The only point is that we must be sure there is religion. And religion is more than a way of functioning; it is relation to a Reality outside ourselves, and that Reality cannot always be manipulated to suit our convenience.

Men speak of religion as they speak of politics, as a way in which people organize themselves to achieve certain social, or human, goods. It is a constructive social insti-

<sup>5</sup> *Clue to History* (Harper & Bros.), p. 20.

tution just so long as it serves desirable human ends. There is no objective reality, "out there," which corresponds to it, just as there is no objective reality named "politics," and the only test of its truth is the pragmatic test of its ability to serve man's needs.

Historians have analyzed the religions of past cultures, thinking that they had said the last word when they had shown their functional efficiency. Prescientific peoples needed gods to preside over the functionings of nature, making the sun rise, the crops grow, the seasons change, and the like. Since they did not know the real causes for such things, they invented gods for the purpose. So warring peoples needed gods of war to guarantee victory. Cities had local gods to protect their interests, as Jehovah protected Jerusalem and Athena protected Athens. Negro slaves, deprived of all the good things of this life, needed a religion which would send a whole band of angels to come and carry them home to a life that would be better.

Thus the religions were supposed to have risen, served their purposes, and ceased to be when society changed and their functions were no longer needed. The historians have been able to write of the deaths as well as the births of religions, for when they ceased to be functionally useful, they were laid in the cemetery, with headstones marking the dates of birth and death and the causes of the unlamented decease. We have read books containing the obituaries of the poor departed gods, dead because men had no further use for them.

Even more familiar is the functional interpretation of religion in the present and the immediate future. For even in this boasted scientific age there are some things

which man seems unable to manage, and if religion will help, he will be glad to use it.

Our atomic scientists, for instance, have the information and the imagination to be terrified by the possible results of their discovery. If the rest of us are not terrified, it is probably because we do not know as much as they do. Some of those scientists are undoubtedly deeply religious men. It is possible that until now others of them have had little interest in personal religion. But now they are turning with surprising unanimity to religion as one means of teaching people to live together and avoid annihilation. If religion can function to save men from war, it is obviously valid, just as vaccination which saves them from small pox. And if it cannot function to save men from the destructive results of their own cleverness, then it is equally obvious that it is useless.

The same thing is true in our industrial strife. With both parties to the perennial conflict growing stronger day by day, and with the public growing more helpless and government more confused, some agency should be found which can bring the warring factions together and establish peace, and possibly religion can do it. Most discussions of religion-labor relations seem much more interested in getting the church interested in labor than in getting laborers interested in the program of the church. There is much talk of applying Christianity to the relief of labor problems, but it is not clear just whose Christianity it is that is to be applied. And it is much more rarely that one asks just what God may be thinking about the whole thing. If religion can function in such a crisis, then it is obviously one of man's effective tools.

Similar thinking applies to our international tensions,

our racial frictions, and to any other social problems which cry for solution. And it is not surprising that when such problems remain unsolved or even grow more acute, religion is thought to have been discredited because it failed to function.

We are continually being reminded that sin and repentance have largely disappeared from our religious vocabulary and our religious practice. But this is not surprising if religion is merely the man-made servant of man. So far as religion is concerned, man would have nothing to repent of unless it would be that he has failed to create an effective religion. If there is to be repentance and a sense of failure, religion should repent to man because it has served him poorly and failed to discharge the function for which he created it. Religion can, according to such thinking, be indicted as an unprofitable servant; the place of man is merely to be served.

What is true of social life is true also of personal life. Religion must give us what we need and cannot find elsewhere. Probably most of us have progressed beyond the point of demanding that religion shall make fish jump on our life rafts and shall prevent any plague from coming nigh our dwellings. But not so many have progressed beyond the demand that religion explain the evils which we have to suffer, or even remove them. Many psychiatrists seem to be using religion merely as a means of mental cure, and one quite eminent psychiatrist recently acknowledged that he recommended religion to his patients because he thought it would help to cure their emotional instability, but that for himself, he was entirely agnostic, and since he was not sick, had no need of religion.

Similarly, a very prominent educator while visiting China encouraged the missionaries, telling them what

a good work they were doing in spreading Christianity among the Chinese. He wished for them many converts, because Christianity would do the Chinese so much good. It would function well in that social situation. But in conversation with one of the missionaries he acknowledged quite freely that he was not a Christian. And this was no hypocrisy. His idea was simply that Christianity should be applied only where it was needed.

Let us make no mistake. Religion does function, more efficiently and over wider areas than most of us have stopped to realize. If all the people involved were genuinely, devoutly Christian, there would still be problems to be solved, but they could be solved most happily and most successfully, with a modicum of thought and patience. Labor and capital, though with different approaches, would be working together for the common good. Races would learn to live together with mutual respect which would soon come to be taken for granted. Emotional collapses would be reduced to a minimum. Divorces would practically disappear. And other results would follow which we can scarcely imagine. Eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard, and it has not entered into the imagination of man to conceive the pattern of a society made up of people whose skill and intelligence were matched by an equally sincere Christian piety.

But the "functional approach" to religion leaves out one essential thing, and that is God. Imagine damming up a lake in the mountains, laying great water mains down to immense turbines, and arranging for the distribution of electric current over wires fanning out in every direction. One gets the idea as to how water power can be made to function for human good. But suppose there is no water in the lake! The whole functional

question becomes at best only academic. But men have been talking about applying the Spirit of God to social institutions without bothering to ask whether the Spirit of God was available. To talk about the functioning of religion without reference to the previous question of the soul's relation to an objective God deserves the criticisms of Marx and of Freud, both of whom denounced religion because it did not respond to any reality. Marx said that it was a drug to keep the people doped, and Freud said that it was the extension of the father-complex, a kind of wishful thinking that we might depend on the God who is not there.

How different when we go back to the Bible! There is practically no talk of religion as a human institution and of what man can do with it. But there is much talk of God. Open the book where we will, and we find God standing there waiting to meet us. The question is not how we can use him. It is not so easy to think of manipulating the Almighty for our convenience. He does not like to be pushed around. The one question of the Bible is what God can do with us, or what he will do with us.

And the biblical authors never suggest that it is a sentimentally beautiful experience to meet with God. Usually it is terrifying, and sometimes it is disastrous.

The Hebrews at Sinai could not bear to look on him or to hear his voice. Isaiah got a glimpse of him and cried out, "Woe to me, for I am lost!" Jeremiah plead to be released from his service, only to be told that if he had been racing with footmen, he would from that time on race with horses. Ezekiel struggled in confusion for an adequate description of the God who appeared to him, and when he saw his glory, he fell upon his face. In a moving passage Daniel says:

## STILL THE BIBLE SPEAKS

So I turned my face toward the Lord God, applying myself to prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes; and I interceded with the Lord my God, and made confession, saying, 'Ah now, O Lord, the great and revered God, who keeps loving faith with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned, we have acted wrongfully and wickedly, we have rebelled and turned aside from thy commandments and ordinances, and we have not listened to thy servants, the prophets, who spoke in thy name to our kings and princes, our leaders, and all the common people. (Dan. 9:3-6.)

The contrast between this placing of God at the center of life and much that is characteristic of our modern mood needs no underscoring. There is no guarantee that this God will act in accord with our immediate interests or desires. Often the will of God is terrible. "All thy waves and thy billows pass over me!" cried the psalmist. And again:

He made darkness his covert;  
His encircling pavilion was the darkness of the heavens,  
Thick clouds without brightness;  
Before him passed his thick clouds,  
Hailstones, and coals of fire,  
And the Lord thundered from the heavens,  
The Most High uttered his voice.  
He let fly his arrows and scattered them;  
Lightnings he hurled and routed them. (Ps. 18:11-14.)

Jesus heard the voice of God speaking to him in his baptism. Until then, he seems to have lived a very normal, well adjusted life as a carpenter in Nazareth. But he heard the voice of God, and in a year or two he was dead.

Amos heard the voice of God speaking of his people;  
 Though they dig into Sheol,  
 Thence shall my hand take them;  
 And though they mount up to the heavens,  
 Thence will I bring them down;  
 Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel,  
 Thence will I search them out and take them;  
 Though they hide themselves from my eyes on the floor of  
 the sea,  
 There will I command the serpent, that it bite them;  
 Though they go into captivity before their foes,  
 There will I command the sword, that it slay them;  
 And I will set my eye upon them  
 For evil, and not for good. (Amos 9:2-4.)

Many men receive visions of God or of his messengers in both Old and New Testaments, and every one of them is overwhelmed by the experience. God is not a function of humanity. He is as objective to man as gravity, and while he may, like gravity, support those who are upright, those who lose their balance are cast down to their own undoing.

*The Earth Is the Lord's*

Probably nothing draws a sharper line between the way life felt to the ancients and the way it feels to us. We interpret life in terms of immediate causes, and the relevancy of any Great First Cause has become very vague and hypothetical. The ancients knew little of immediate causes, and all life spoke to them of God. The Bible contains some of the most beautiful nature poems in all literature, but the word "nature" does not once appear. Nature was not an abstraction, but was God in action.



## STILL THE BIBLE SPEAKS

The Bible contains no proofs of the existence of God. Those writers needed no proof, because they had found him. No more did Edison stop to prove that electricity existed, nor does the artist prove that there is such a thing as beauty. The heavens declared to them his glory, and the firmament showed the work of his hands. They were parts of his self-revelation, and it was not necessary to prove the existence of a God who had already revealed himself. H. Wheeler Robinson says:

Once this attribution of Nature to God was attained, it clearly afforded a disclosure of God of the greatest importance. The prophet could point to the whole panorama of Nature, created, sustained and transformed by God, as his constant activity, ever revealing his purposes. . . . The divine activity in Nature is itself in part constitutive of the revelation. It is through God's control of natural phenomena—locusts, drought, storm and flood, lightning and fire, earthquake and changes of the earth's surface—that He often actually accomplishes His purposes of judgment or deliverance.<sup>6</sup>

One rises above the level of argument and description to share the exalted mood of the ancient man of God:

Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving;  
Sing praises to our God upon the lute!  
For he covers the heavens with clouds;  
He prepares rain for the earth;  
He makes grass spring forth upon the hills.  
He gives to the cattle their food,  
And to the young ravens when they cry. (Ps. 147:7-9.)

<sup>6</sup> *Inspiration and Revelation in The Old Testament* (Clarendon Press), pp. 161-162.

## GOD AND HIS WORLD

As there is no proof of the existence of this ever-present and ever-active God, so there is no definition of him. Religion has never been quite so ponderous as when it has undertaken to define God. But the ancients needed no definition, and would have been satisfied with none. The definitions which we put first they did not think important enough to put even last. As the visitor at Saint Paul's cathedral is told to look around him if he would see the monument to its great architect, so man need only look around him to see what God, the great architect of the universe, is like.

O Lord, my God, thou art very great;  
Thou art robed with majesty and honor;  
Who veilest thyself in light as in a garment;  
Who stretchest out the heavens like a tent. (Ps. 104:1-2.)

He is the God

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,  
And ruled off the heavens with a span,  
And weighed the mountains with a balance  
And the hills in scales. (Isa. 40:12.)

Of course all the world, and all the men in it, belong to God.

The earth is the Lord's and its fulness,  
The world and those who dwell therein.  
For he hath founded it upon the seas,  
And established it upon the ocean currents. (Ps. 24:1.)

We are all visitors on God's earth, using as trustees his possessions during our brief span of life. Much is now

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being said of stewardship, but for the Bible *all* religion is stewardship. For stewardship is just this discovery that the world and they that dwell therein belong to God, and that our life problem is to find how he would have us use it all. The cattle upon a thousand hills are his, even though some farmers probably think that they belonged to them. In spite of what title deeds may say, "the summits of the hills are his also. The sea is his, for he made it; and his hands formed the dry land." The air which we breathe is his, and just as truly his are the treasures which he has hid in the bowels of the earth and the increase of grain which he forces the earth to yield. We ourselves are his, the people of his pasture. To live religiously is to discover this fact, and to organize all our living and thinking around it. It is the natural atmosphere of the Bible. To many moderns it is at the best quaint poetry.

Of course primitive man knew nothing of our scientific approach to the world. He therefore had crude ideas as to *how* God acts in nature. We, on the other hand, have discovered process in everything, and so we think that God is no longer necessary. The natural sciences, psychology, history, sociology—all have at one time or another been guilty of this logical *non sequitur*. "Scientific knowledge can never invalidate religious faith, however much it may lead to the restatement of the ways and means of God." <sup>7</sup> But we have developed "an inveterate prejudice in favor of nature's fixity and virtual independence of God." <sup>8</sup>

The psalmist saw a few little stars hung out in the evenings, and he sang, "The heavens declare the glory of

<sup>7</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

God." It is not necessary for us to see the little heavenly dome as he saw it. Our question is whether we can find in the vast interstellar spaces which science has given us, the very thought of which benumbs our imaginations, the same spiritual values which he found in his snug little universe. If not, we have gained many light-years of space and lost all meaning out of them, which is a losing bargain.

The ancient writer looked back a few generations, and said: "In the beginning God created." We can no longer share his fore-shortened view of history, but if through study we have gained uncounted geologic eras and lost God out of the whole process, then we are the poorer, and in one sense the ancients were more right than we are.

The ancients looked forward to a future even shorter than their past, and expected the climax of history to usher them into the fulfillment of God's great purpose. We extend the future through aeons as we have the past, but the question asked by religion still persists. Can we find meaning and a sense of direction in our longer span as they did in their shorter? Is history leading us to some kingdom of God? If not, we will continue going for milleniums, but going nowhere.

Eventually we must choose. The faith which is all too widespread is that in the beginning was matter. Vast, meaningless, purposeless, it spun its unconscious course for billions of years unaware of its own existence. A little while ago, at about five minutes to twelve on the clock's face, on this negligible speck of matter, conditions chanced to get just right, and there evolved, by happy accident, like lichen on a rock, these beings with thought and conscience. They will last a little while, until the

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next icecap extinguishes them, and immortal matter will continue on its blind way through a meaningless eternity, neither knowing nor caring that the little human incident ever occurred.

Bertrand Russell has expressed this creed of the materialist in an essay entitled (of all things!) "Free Man's Worship." "Omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. Brief and powerless is man's life: on him and all his race the sure, slow doom falls pitiless and dark."

The other alternative is the faith of religion, and of the Bible. "In the beginning, God." All else derives from him, and has significance because of its relation to him. Even physical scientists are now telling us that the future developments of evolution must be in the direction of spirit, as the most significant developments of the past have been. It is something more than tradition or mere sentiment which makes people, in times of crisis when they look for something that is eternal and unshakeable, turn to their Bibles. There, brushing aside prescientific crudities, they find the Eternal Spirit which sustains all life, and they are at home with their God.

# GOD AND HIS PEOPLE

WE HAVE SEEN THAT THE BIBLE CHALLENGES US TO INTERPRET our world in terms of God. The heavens declare, not merely celestial mechanics, but the glory of God. We are visitors on his earth, and trustees of his property, for "the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof, the world, and they that dwell therein."

It is equally clear that the Bible interprets history in terms of God's action. Even more pronounced than his reign over the physical world without is his control over the social and moral forces which create human progress.

In the beginning we may guard against two popular mistakes. The first we have referred to in an earlier connection. It is the mistake of treating the Bible as a finished textbook, to be consulted as authoritative by successive generations. The Bible is not "fixed." It is the record of religious strivings and yearnings such as we experience today. Frequently the authors are perplexed, and cannot find the answers. Frequently they are weak, and cry out for help. More than one psalmist cries out against the collapse of all goodness. Jeremiah saw his nation fall, and its religion all but suppressed. Elijah was sure that Baal worship had captured Israel and driven out Jehovah, and that he was the only one left on earth who was faithful. And he was leaving Israel to her doom. "The Israelites have forsaken the covenant with thee, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left,

and they are seeking to take away my life." (I Kings 19:10.) And we should remind ourselves that it was as much of a tragedy for one's nation to fall then as it would be today, and it meant as much for one's religion to be exterminated by force as it would for us. For Elijah everything had collapsed, and he was leaving the country.

Similarly Habakkuk complained that Jehovah was indifferent "when the wicked swallows up him that is more religious than himself." He wondered, as we often wonder, what on earth God was doing. Job charges God with having no preference for the good over the evil, which sounds strangely familiar to the readers of our modern cynics. And Jesus himself felt in one awful hour that his Father had forsaken him.

These men were trying to find their way, just as we are trying to find our way, and frequently the obstacles in the way were much the same. The Bible is the record of a process, not merely of the end results. It is not a book of answers, but of men who were looking for the answers, and who often have much to tell us because of the things which they discovered. In the process, men were confronted with God, with his claims upon their loyalty, with the necessity for deep decisions, and with the resources which were available for their victory. And since we are but a later stage of the same process, still subject to his discipline and correction and still in need of his aid, we are bidden to seek him in our time as they sought him in theirs. And until we learn that the process is his, and that through it he is working out his eternal purposes, we will never learn what those ancients have to tell us, and interpret life religiously. The Bible speaks to the experiences of every age, not

as authority, but as interpreting the experiences common to every age.

The second mistake against which we should be on our guard is the naïve assumption that the God who speaks through the Bible does not also speak elsewhere. The Golden Rule when spoken by Confucius was just as valid ethically as when found in the Bible, and came from the same source. Some of the ethical teachings of the Stoic Seneca were so much like Paul's that there grew up the myth that the philosopher was a secret convert of the apostle. A high school teacher showed a class that some of the ideas of Jesus had also been taught by Socrates centuries earlier, and several of the parents demanded that the teacher be dismissed because he was dangerous to the faith of the children.

The reason for stopping to mention this is that we will be noticing some of the ideals which the Bible has implanted in our civilization. It is quite true that some of these ideals have been taught by other teachers and are found in other cultures. But the point is that it was not through these other cultures that they came into our civilization, but through the Bible. And it is through the Bible and other agencies which are pensioners upon it that they are kept alive in our society today. We stand in the Hebrew-Christian tradition. There are many fine things in other traditions, some of them strikingly like our own. But it is the Hebrew-Christian Bible which has given us spiritual birth and nurtured our spiritual growth, and to it we must turn for guidance.

### *God In History*

It is not necessary to accumulate evidence that the Bible writers related their state to God, though the mass



of evidence which the Bible affords would probably surprise many.

The very idea of a "chosen people" is significant. Israel was not God's people because the Israelites were good enough to deserve it. Nor did they choose Jehovah to be their God. The initiative was God's. While they were yet a very little and helpless people, Jehovah chose them to be his people, delivered them from slavery, welded them into a unit by his covenant, led them to a new home, drove out their enemies, and settled them there. Every little detail of the origin of their national life had God in it. And what was true of Israel in the Old Testament was also true of the Christian church in the New Testament. Both rest back, according to their own thinking, upon the utterly unmerited, gracious love of God. To his initiative, and to his constant leadership, all biblical writers attributed the significance of his chosen people.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the policies of the people were the concern of the prophets who were God's spokesmen. It was the prophet Samuel who first decided that they needed a king, and chose Saul as the first to occupy that position. When Saul lost the favor of the prophet, he lost his throne. His successor David was chosen by the same prophet. When later northern Israel revolted against southern Judah, it was a prophet who chose Jeroboam to lead the revolt. And later still, when Jehu revolted and overthrew the house of Jezebel, it was the prophet Elisha who laid the revolt and then started it in motion. The policies of government were the direct concern of God. It was quite appropriate that kings were

anointed—we would say “ordained”—just as were the priests, for both were God’s agents.

These people’s interpretation of their own history falls into a fixed pattern, and their kings are judged, not by military achievements nor by economic gain, but by their loyalty to the will of God. Some kings did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, while others made Israel to sin, and not a great deal more needed to be said about most of them. The Jews have shown insight in calling these books, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, not histories but prophecies, for the entire historic panorama is presented from the viewpoint of religion.

For similar reasons, the books which we recognize as prophecies are concerned almost as much with what we would call politics as with religion. The prophets were the men who knew what Israel ought to do, because they knew the will of God. H. W. Robinson has said that “most obviously of all, the prophet is the interpreter of history. Here prophecy found its chief material and from this derived its most significant content, which ultimately characterized the whole religion of Israel.”<sup>1</sup>

This religious interpretation of their history was especially significant for their outlook into the future. The whole idea of Jehovah’s ultimate redemption of his people was based on this confidence that their history was merely the working out of his purpose, and that therefore they must eventually be saved because he could not be defeated. Thus was born their hope of a messianic age, with its assurance of their ultimate destiny. It is certain that this hope was never based on any

<sup>1</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *op. cit.* p. 163.

resources of men or of money which they had in themselves. It was this hope which enabled them to survive when their neighbor tribes were all disappearing from the stage of history, and largely through its agency Judaism has been able to give her religion to the rest of the world.

It has been claimed that this religious expectancy in Judaism produced the first consciousness of progression anywhere in history. Ancients had a very vague time consciousness. Time was for them either a flat surface on which events took place, or else, as for the Greeks, time tended to move in cycles with no goal and no progress. Berdyaev says:

The philosophy of history is in its origins intimately allied with eschatology; and this helps to explain its rise among the Jewish people. Eschatology is the doctrine of the goal of history, its issue and fulfillment. It is absolutely essential for the conception and the elaboration of the idea of history, as a significant progression or movement capable of fulfillment." <sup>2</sup>

Even the collapse of the state and its cult in the sixth century before Christ was interpreted as an act of God, calling for a better understanding of his will and a renewed obedience to his purpose. Second Isaiah reaches his classical climax when he interprets the prolonged misfortunes of his people as their opportunity to serve as the Servant of Jehovah, sharing the knowledge of their God with foreign peoples.

The history of Israel was thus founded upon their faith in their God, and aside from Jehovah there would have been no Israel. Robinson has said that this theocen-

<sup>2</sup> The Meaning of History (Charles Scribner's Sons), p. 32.

## GOD AND HIS PEOPLE

tric interpretation of history "is something new in the world, as applied to history, and is as important a change as that from Ptolemaic to Copernican astronomy."<sup>3</sup>

When we turn from ancient Israel to our modern civilization, our entire vocabulary changes because we think in different terms. We find many other causes at work in the building of our Western culture, and they are valid causes just as were the causes which we found operating in the physical world. But if, in absorption with other things, we lose sight of God's place in our state and our culture, then we are essentially pagan, and we may expect the final moral collapse which follows all paganisms.

This truth of the inadequacy of a pagan culture, and the need of a religious foundation for our civilization has been seen by so many thoughtful observers that quotations might become monotonous. H. G. Wells, who called the Bible "the cement of civilization," said:

The Bible has been the Book that held together the fabric of Western civilization. It has been the handbook of life to countless millions of men and women. The civilization we possess could not have come into existence and could not have been sustained without it.

And William Ernest Hocking has a most interesting testimony to add. He asks:

How do you read the history of Western civilization? The essence of it is not that it has bred science and technique, nor that it has bred laws and a high civic order. The essence of it is that it has bred men; and that men have produced the sciences and the public order. How has it bred

<sup>3</sup>H. Wheeler Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

men? Here our sociologists customarily go blind and appeal to a mechanical psychology, or northern climates, or Nordic races, or inventions, or movements of populations, or the rise of capital wealth. . . . The central thing is that men have lived, with all their usual problems and energies and passions, under the spell of a religion which encouraged them to believe in their own worth, not in each other's natural eyes, but in the eyes of an absolute and competent judge of worth. They had a God who cared for them, not indulgently and mushily, but with a divine and severe insight.<sup>5</sup>

Among public men, a surprisingly large number have testified to the place of the Bible and its religion as a foundation of our political institutions. F. C. Stifler in his book *The Bible Speaks* says that almost every one of the thirty-two presidents of the United States has felt his indebtedness to the Bible. One or two quotations will illustrate a much larger number of statements.

George Washington said: "It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible." (P. 42.)

Andrew Jackson's testimony was that "it is the rock on which our Republic rests," (P. 42.)

President Harrison said: "It is out of the Word of God that a system has come to make life sweet. If you blot out of your statute books, your Constitution, your family life, all that is taken from the sacred Book, what would there be left to bind society together?" (P. 43.)

President Wilson likewise linked our American destiny to the Bible, and one of his last utterances was, "I ask of every man and woman in this audience that from

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Hocking has not been able to help me locate where he wrote these words but agrees that they express his view.

this day on they will realize that part of the destiny of America lies in their daily perusal of this great Book." (P. 76.)

And in similar vein President Coolidge said a little later; "The foundations of our society and of our government rest so much on the teachings of the Bible that it would be difficult to support them, if faith in these teachings should cease to be practically universal in our country." (P. 76.)

So much for a sampling of our presidents. I think they were not speaking conventionally, but out of a deep realization that a society is based on the moral fiber of its people, and that our moral fiber is a product of our Bible.

Similar judgments could be borrowed from other directions. Gladstone said that his only hope for the world was in bringing people to know the divine revelation. Queen Victoria is said to have given to one of her subordinate princes a copy of the Bible, with the message to his people that England's greatness was based on England's Bible.

The interesting thing about such statements is not that these rulers approve of the Bible and urge their people to read it. As leading statesmen of the world they are recognizing the significance of the Bible for the modern state, and for the societies which these states embody. It is from the Bible that we learn the sacredness and the responsibilities of life, the fundamental morals, and the other basic conceptions on which democratic society must rest. Like the prophets of old, they knew that unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that built it.

If we have any doubts about the importance of bibli-

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cal morality for our democratic way of life, we might learn from our enemies. Hitler, fighting to destroy democracy both as a form of government and as a way of life, is quoted by Hermann Rauschning as saying:

It is not merely a question of Christianity and Judaism. We are fighting against the most ancient curse that humanity has brought on itself. It's got to get out of our blood, that curse from Mount Sinai! That poison with which both Jews and Christians have spoiled and soiled the free, wonderful instincts of man. . . . And history will recognize our movement as the great battle for liberation, a liberation from the curse of Mount Sinai. . . . This is what we are fighting against, the curse of so-called morals.

Hitler knew that it was not possible to destroy democracy without destroying the Bible. We know that it is not possible to build democracy without building on the Bible.

It is at this point that many thoughtful observers are concerned for the future, even the immediate future, of our civilization. Other cultures which have seemed just as strongly entrenched as ours have passed out of the picture. Are we on the way out too? We have a culture which has drawn its finest and most important features from the standards of the Bible and the faith which it has nourished. But we have largely cut it off from its source. We have secularized our politics until the old shibboleth of the separation of church and state has come to mean the irreligion of the state. We have secularized our education to the point where the one thing which cannot be taught in our schools is the one thing most essential to our culture. Walter Lippmann would scarcely be called a religious enthusiast, but he

has said that modern education is "destined to destroy Western civilization by failing to transmit from generation to generation the religious and classical culture of the Western world."

Similarly *The New Republic*, which bothers little about its religious orthodoxy, has written that

the steady expansion of secular knowledge is the dominating fact in the lives of Christian people. It is exercising an ever more complete and irresistible authority over the conduct and the conscience of mankind. But its authority is devoid of moral sanction. If the secularization of knowledge continues, it will ultimately wreck civilization.

We have secularized our vocations until they are frequently referred to as "secular occupations," and any attempt to evaluate our business life in religious terms would be unintelligible. Success is never interpreted in such a way as to include Jesus as a successful man, and the ethics of Jesus at a directors' meeting would probably cause embarrassment.

We have secularized our domestic relations until one of the fundamental causes underlying the inflation in our divorce market is the omission of religion from the popular idea of marriage, and its acceptance instead as a contract or partnership, terminable at the wish of the contracting parties.

The list could be extended. And it causes concern only when we stop to realize how much of what we have has come to us from the principles of the Bible which we are so largely neglecting. It is not surprising that D. Elton Trueblood has referred to our "cut-flower civilization." One wonders how long we can continue to keep the flowers after we have severed them from the roots which



gave them life and determined their nature. Coleridge said that "for more than a thousand years the Bible, collectively taken, has gone hand in hand with civilization, science, law—in short, with the moral and intellectual cultivation of the species, always supporting and often leading the way."<sup>4</sup> If that was true for the thousand years before Coleridge, one wonders what moral forces will be supporting and leading the way in the thousand years ahead of us.

If it is complained that the low moral levels of the Middle Ages come within the thousand years to which Coleridge referred, we should remind ourselves that those were just the years when Jesus was removed from the earth by being exalted as a God in heaven, and when the Bible was considered so dangerous that it was not even made available to the common people.

Shailer Mathews wrote, in his *Evolution of Religion*:

The Dark Ages and brutality of the Middle Ages are not chargeable to the Church. They were the result of social forces which the Church had to withstand and transform. And despite all difficulties, it did its work. The only learning was in its circles, the only social ideals were in its teachings, the only social service was in its institutions.

We have largely secularized our life, in spite of the encouraging statistics of our churches. Are we moving, as Will Durant said some years ago, "into an age of spiritual exhaustion and despondency like that which hungered for the birth of Christ?" The greatest question of our time, he said, "is not communism versus individualism, not Europe versus America, not even the

<sup>4</sup>Nelson, *op. cit.*, pp. 141-42.

East versus the West; it is whether man can bear to live without God." Possibly the most significant political fact in our world today is that our people have so largely lost their faith in God as a real factor in human life.

### *Making Religion Moral*

Naturally we take for granted the culture within which we live. It seems so natural as to be inevitable. We seldom question its standards, and more seldom still do we stop to ask the sources from which it has been derived.

This is particularly true of the ethicizing of our religious life. Whether one has much personal interest in religion or not, he assumes that "religious" ought to mean "good." A man very religious but very immoral would be a contradiction in terms.

But this is true only because of what our Bible has done for our religious impulses. There is much religion outside the Bible. The religious impulse is as deep-seated and inevitable in the human make-up as any other part, and it is bound to express itself in one way or another. The universality of the religious impulse is attested by the fact that every people who have been known on earth have been found to have some form of religion. And the power of the religious impulse is shown by the way in which those who have been disappointed in some particular system turn to every form of superstition or paganism. Man must have some kind of adjustment to the cosmos in which he lives, and the adjustment which he finds is his religion.

Yes, men have always been religious, but what a horrible thing religion has been! One can scarcely name a

crime, an atrocity, or a vulgarity which has not been openly taught by religion. Murder, adultery, torture, theft, lying, treachery, licentiousness, drunkenness—all these and many more have been forced on society, not as occasional lapses to be condoned, but as the proud practice of religious custom. No one can ever number the lives which have been debauched, the homes that have been broken, the states that have been weakened and corrupted by this amazing religious impulse.

If such statements seem exaggerated, one need only look away from his Bible, reminding himself that most of the religion of the world has been outside the Hebrew-Christian tradition. Religion has taught the type of conduct pleasing to the gods, and many gods have been interested little, or not at all, in man's treatment of his fellow man.

Primitive religions, for instance, have been interested in magic, in superstitions, and very largely in ways to keep terrible gods from visiting their wrath upon men. But one does not think of the religions of savagery as concerned with making men good except as conformity to the tribal superstitions is interpreted as goodness.

The mythologies of Greece are peculiarly relevant, for Greece possessed not a savage but a most advanced civilization. Her architecture and sculpture are still the classics after twenty-five centuries. Her philosophies are influencing more people today than any philosophers who have succeeded them. Her historians and dramatists need only to be mentioned to be appreciated. Surely so advanced a people could be expected to have a religion as advanced as the rest of their culture.

But in all the stories of the Greek gods, one would have to search to find a single incident in which a god

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was primarily interested in making men good. Rather, the reverse was true, for so many of the gods were immoral that in the worship of Bacchus, Adonis, Venus, and some of the others, drunkenness and prostitution became religious virtues. When one reads of the orgies of Dionysus and the groves of Venus, it is not hard to understand the philosopher who appealed to the town council of Athens to pass a prohibition law against religion so that the philosophers would have a chance to make the youth moral. Cardinal James Gibbons has said of the religion of the Greeks:

Moral teaching was not included among the priestly functions. . . . On the festivals of Bacchus prizes were given to the deepest drinkers. In Greece and Rome the worship of Aphrodite was characterized by shameless impurity and unnatural crimes. Shrines consecrated to Venus were maintained at the expense of notorious courtesans. Ovid advises women to shun the temples of the gods, that they might not be there reminded of the lasciviousness of Jupiter.

That was religion, or at least one side of religion, among the most cultured people of the world. It is easy to see why Arthur S. Peake should say that in matters of religion the Hebrews appear among the peoples of antiquity as a sober man among drunkards.

Hebrew religion itself existed on a low moral level in the early days. To realize this one need only recall the destruction of the Amalekites, including all the children and even the animals, a crime of the type which has shocked people in modern warfare. Jehovah ordered this blitz, and for no reason at all except his own ruthlessness.

In order to induce Ahab to enter a battle in which

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he would be defeated and killed. Jehovah put "a lying spirit" into four hundred prophets and sent them to promise him that he would be victorious.

The religious impulse of the Hebrews did not always function in the direction of ethical living, but the Bible shows us the epochal achievement of ethicizing religion. From Amos to Jesus, for eight centuries, the best religious leaders were making the people realize that the fundamental fact about Jehovah God was not his race prejudice in favor of a chosen people, nor his love for the flattery of honorific titles and the pageantry of worship, nor even his transcendent power and majesty. The essential thing about Jehovah was simply his moral character, or to use the word which those writers so much loved, his righteousness.

Here is one of the outstanding achievements in the whole development of modern culture. It is so fundamental that it is difficult for us to think in any other terms, though unfortunately there can still be seen some evidence of what religion can mean when given other interpretations. Hitler's attempted revival of primitive Nordic myths is an illustration among a highly cultured people, but the biblical tradition has proved too strong in Germany for even a Hitler. More primitive illustrations are unfortunately familiar here at home. The longer one thinks of the significance of what the prophets and Jesus have done, the more overwhelming it is seen to be. One dares not think what the world would be like if they had not come.

### *Persons Are Sacred*

Another of the basic ideas of our civilization, which we take for granted in discussion and at least partly acknowl-

edge in practice is the sacredness of persons. And this, too, is largely the deposit of biblical teachings.

It is hard for us to realize how cheap human life has been, and still is, in places untouched by Hebrew-Christian ideals. The simple fact that in the Greco-Roman world there were many more slaves than free men is itself significant. Of course there were no dependable censuses, but estimates run from "more than half" to two-thirds, or even more. And men cannot own their fellow men as property and still have respect for them as persons. Aristotle, the "father of modern ethics," said that the use made of slaves and of tame animals was not any different, and another of the ancient sages listed the implements which man could use under three heads: tools, animals and slaves. If even the philosophers and the moralists argued that slaves were property and therefore had no rights, one can imagine the attitude of the common man. It was quite in keeping that slaves were allowed to die without the services of a doctor because a new slave would cost less than the doctor's fee. In the South we are still trying, after eighty years, to recover from the effects of having once felt that we had a right to own people, and the Negroes are trying to recover from the effects of having been owned.

Evidences of the cheapness of human life are pathetically abundant, and when we read the details, they are often sickening. The custom of "exposing" undesired infants and troublesome grandparents was perfectly respectable, and was practiced without the slightest qualm in the nicest society. "Expose" was a euphemy for leaving them out to starve or be killed by prowling animals, or in the case of the less fortunate girl babies, to be picked up and saved for lives of shame. A soldier in serv-

ice in Alexandria writes to his wife, who is soon to become a mother. The letter is tender and affectionate, expressing his pride in her and his hopes for the baby. And then, in a perfectly matter-of-fact way, he adds that of course if the baby should be a girl the mother will "expose" her.

The story of the gladiatorial contests is too familiar to need retelling, and the important thing to remember is that they were in no way necessary. They were just fun for the observers. The brutalities of the galleys and of the mines they could at least explain as necessary to the ongoing of society. But the "games," with their increasing number of victims and with increasing ingenuity in torture, were merely for the sake of amusing the public. Lecky lists the cynical attitude toward life and suffering which resulted from these contents as one of the causes which undermined European civilization and brought on the Dark Ages.

But this attitude has survived this side of the Dark Ages. One need mention only the burning of widows which was practiced among high-class Hindus until the British government stopped it, and the uncounted multitudes purged by Nazi Germany and by Soviet Russia, to be reminded that human life still does not amount to much in societies untouched by our biblical tradition.

Such an attitude could not survive long in the atmosphere of the Bible. The old Hebrews owned slaves, and they practiced cruelties, but the very genius of their thought meant that the barbarities must be outgrown.

The Bible lays the foundation for the dignity of man by explaining him in terms of his relation to God. Man was God's idea in the first place. And God made him for a position of dignity, to exercise dominion over all else.

It is hard to think of man as he is described in the first chapter of Genesis as merely the property of someone else. Whatever the phrases may have meant originally, subsequent readers have been impressed with the fact that man was made in the image of God, and that into his nostrils God breathed the breath of life.

For a long time the Israelites had little respect for others than Israelites, the "neighbors" whom they were commanded to love. The implication was that while they loved their Israelitish neighbors, they should hate their enemies. But even this limitation could not continue. More than one of the prophets pictured the ultimate inclusion of "the nations" in the covenant, and Second Isaiah actually pictured Jehovah as redeeming the other peoples through the suffering of his own people.

In the New Testament, Jesus' attitude toward the outcasts of his own people, and toward the Samaritans whom his people hated, and Paul's stubborn refusal to know any difference between Jew and Greek, between slave and free, finally opened the way for the meanest and humblest to know himself as heir of God, joint heir with Jesus Christ in the heavenly family. There is good historic basis for the claim so often made that democracy as a way of life—not as a form of government—is a fruitage of biblical religion, and would wither if its biblical roots were cut.

And here let me say a word for the older type of revivalism, which it is now so popular to dismiss with a shrug. It had its faults, and it does not hold the secret of future religious development. But there has probably been no single force in our society during recent centuries which has so effectively emphasized the value of



the individual. It specialized in the type of individual who seemed least worthful. Its chief appeal was to the drunk, the profligate, the ne'er-do-well. And it persistently insisted that each one of them was a child of God, and had infinite worth in God's sight. Polite society, like the Pharisaism of all ages, passed them by with contempt, or pushed them farther down the ladder. But the revivalist made his chief appeal to those farthest down, and dared to believe that it was impossible for a man to get so low that he was not still potentially divine. To date, the church has not discovered an adequate substitute.

Here an observation is in place. This democratic appreciation of the value of people is historically a deposit of biblical religion. But it is by no means limited to professedly religious people. Multitudes who have no interest in Bible or church none the less share this Christian attitude. For the values of religion are not hidden wisdom, revealed only to the initiate. They are the contribution which the Bible has made to our civilization, and all members of society, religious and irreligious alike, reap the benefit.

Jacques Maritain has a stimulating chapter in which he traces the extent to which the ethics of the Christian gospel has infiltrated the secular conscience.<sup>5</sup> People living in a society which has been influenced by Christian traditions are pensioners upon the faith which they do not possess.

This is true of our family life. With a few exceptions, the sorry story of the suppression and degradation of woman in the ancient world applies to most times and

<sup>5</sup> *Christianity and Democracy* (Charles Scribner's Sons), "Evangelical Inspiration and the Secular Conscience."

places. And this was true of ancient Israel as well as of other ancient peoples. But the basic principles of Hebrew life necessitated different treatment for both women and children, and the change can be traced in the Old Testament.

At the beginning of our era, the place accorded to woman in Palestine was far superior to that given her sisters in more powerful Greece and Rome, even though it had not reached our modern standards. Seneca said that there were women in Rome who counted their years, not by consuls, but by the number of their husbands. Westermarck tells us that the courtesans were by far the most intelligent and cultivated women in Athens, and one of the ancient teachers said that every gentleman needed three women—one to be his legal wife and the mother of his children, one to arouse and satisfy his emotions with her glamour, and one to furnish intellectual companionship with her wit and wisdom, after the fashion of the French salon. The home of the Jew was very different from those of his gentile neighbors, and if he was inclined to look down on them, it was not without good reason.

The home as we now know it was developed under religious influences. Of course other forces were also operating, but we have become so excessively generous in acknowledging outside influences that we are often too timid about making legitimate claims for our faith. We recognize the Christian character of marriage by insisting on the use of Christian worship and Christian traditions in our wedding ceremonies. The relations between husband and wife, and between parents and children, rest back upon profound respect for the sacredness and the rights of persons as children of God. Nazism

and communism, repudiating the Hebrew-Christian tradition, have both tried to abolish the Christian family ideal.

Again we recognize that happy monogamous marriages are not limited to professing Christians, though statistics for divorces inside the church and outside present an interesting contrast. All around us there are unchurched people who are finding deep satisfaction in their happy homes. But they are the beneficiaries of the creed which they do not profess and of the Bible which they ignore. The ethics of the gospel has infiltrated their secular consciences, and one may wonder what their marriages would be like if there had been no Judaism or Christianity.

Much the same thing is true in the world of business. It is axiomatic that the great majority of business today rests on credit. We are fond of stressing the gap between the accepted principles of the business world and the ethic of Christianity, and this is easy to do. But it is also worth while to notice how far we have come under the influence of Christian ideals. For here, too, the ethic of the gospel has infiltrated the secular conscience.

A missionary was telling of her experience in shopping in the Near East. It was a game at which she could not become adept. When she went to a bazaar and asked the price of an article, she could not realize that she was not expected to pay the price asked. That was merely a bargaining price. She in turn was expected to offer very much less. Then the slow haggling would begin, the merchant coming down by inches and forcing her up by inches until he finally got as much as he possibly could, without any relation at all to the value of the article or a fair profit. She had a maid who was a native

and who understood such things, and she found it less expensive to pay the maid a ten per cent commission to do her shopping for her.

Some years ago John Wanamaker started his mail order business. There was much skepticism at first. Did that Philadelphia storekeeper think that people would send him their hard-earned cash and let him mail them shopworn, inferior stuff which they had not seen? But there was one thing on which they had not calculated. John Wanamaker was a Christian. And the mail-order business has grown to its present dimensions because the public has come to be convinced of the integrity of its merchants.

The personnel director for two of the largest American corporations some years ago said that when positions of high responsibility were to be filled, the first question was never as to business ability but as to moral character. Business can be conducted as it is today because we are as nearly Christian as we are. And the most forward-looking leaders in the industrial world are looking for ways to bring it into closer conformity to the ideals of the Bible, though they may not always be conscious of the source of their inspiration.

What has been said of marriage and of business can be said of every other social pattern. It is true that not one of them has ever been Christianized, the church and the home being only partial exceptions, but on the other hand it is also true that not a single one has failed to feel to some extent the influence of the idealism of the Bible. Possibly this is true even of gambling. The ethic of the gospel, like good leaven, has permeated the entire social lump, and it would not be possible to find the area, from piety to penology, which is not different

from what it would have been if we had had no Bible.

Our much-discussed social problems are due in large part to the gap which exists between the best teachings of the Bible on the one hand and the ways in which society actually functions on the other. We have taught the familiar ideas of the Bible until men have begun to take them seriously, and that makes trouble.

### *Infiltrating the Secular Conscience*

Protests against war were not most common when wars were most frequent. Men gloried in warlike virtues, and it was a noble thing to die for one's country. War seems to have been accepted as a normal part of one's life, just as floods and taxes. But men have learned to think in terms of the biblical idea of the sacredness of life, the life of the buck private and even of the enemy, and as a result they have dreamed the dream of peace on earth until the constant slaughter of men because of greed, stupidity, or ambition has become intolerable.

Protests against labor conditions were not most common when labor conditions were worst, and they are not most common today in India or China. They appear when biblical ideas become familiar. To read of labor conditions in early days is enough to destroy one's appetite. Lowell said that the Bible was "the most inflammatory book that could be circulated among a servile population." The servile population got the idea—and ceased to be servile. Men achieved an awareness of their own dignity and worth, and of their right to a share in the wealth they were creating, and labor troubles were born. The Book of Psalms, with its championing of the poor and the distressed, has been called "The Hymn Book of the Poor."

Our acute racial problems did not arise when the Greeks were expressing their contempt for barbarians, Jews were despising the "lesser breeds which knew not the law," and Romans were conquering and enslaving the provincials. Our racial tension is in large part the legitimate child of our highest biblical message. We have preached to minority groups that they are the children of God, that God knows no distinctions, until they have come to believe it. We have talked about the brotherhood of man and the sacredness of personality until the minority groups have come to think that we mean what we say—and there lies our trouble. Now they have begun to ask us to treat them as brothers, and if that seems inconsiderate, the blame is really not theirs but ours.

Our industrial world is showing, in an increasing number of individual spots, an exciting interest in the democratizing of industry. The Bible, of course, knows nothing about modern industry. But it does insist on service as the measure of success rather than possessions, and on kindness as being better than hardness, and on the common good as the object of every effort. Modern industrialists have been exposed to these ideas, and many of them are carrying our ethic of the Christian gospel into their secular enterprise. And it is not only church members who are responding to such ideals, for the leaven is gradually leavening the lump.

It is the universal fashion just now to be pessimistic about social affairs. The prophets of gloom are positively hilarious in their gloominess. And there are certainly symptoms enough to indicate serious internal disorders. But if one would find some basis for hope, he should "take a walk with a century," and remind himself of

conditions as they used to be. It is not ostrichlike blindness to see in much of our social confusion the growing pains which are inevitable if we would achieve progress. And as we look at this slow and painful progress through which slaves are made free, economic slaves struggle toward independence, nations stumblingly search for the formula of peace, races grow in mutual respect, and life is gradually made better for the great masses of the people, there emerges with increasing clearness as the one pattern running through it all, the biblical ideas of the divine character of life, human rights and responsibilities, brotherliness, and service. A thoughtful Chinese said to one of our missionaries that he hoped Christianity had the cure for social unrest, because Christianity had certainly caused it.

And what is the yardstick by which we measure? We have referred to the progress made in the past, and to the desperate need for further progress in the present and the immediate future. By what standard are we to measure progress? From what vantage point are we to look down and pass judgment upon things as they are in terms of things as they should be?

Here we turn almost automatically to the standards which root back in the Bible. The criticism of business is not that it fails to pay dividends, which is supposed to be the business of business, but that it fails to bring the largest good to the human family. The criticism of corrupt politics is not that it is not successful, but that it is corrupt. We base our criticisms on the dreams which the Bible has taught us. We are learning to think in terms of a kingdom of God where his will shall be done on earth as it is done in heaven, and from that viewpoint we pass judgment on all that we see in life around

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us. We are developing that faith which is the assurance of things hoped for. We are looking "for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

We have been told that the Bible is old and out of date, and we find ourselves rather hysterically trying to catch up with it. We have been told that it is irrelevant to our modern world, and we begin to suspect that the only hope for our modern world lies in it.



## THE FINAL REVELATION

WE HAVE SAID IN AN EARLIER CHAPTER THAT THE unfolding revelation of God, of which the Bible is a literary record, reaches its culmination in Jesus. Were it not for those few months of activity in quiet little Palestine, the world would have no Bible as we know it. The Old Testament would be the justly prized possession of the Jews, and the rest of the world would probably know very little about it. Certainly they would not be accepting it as their scriptures. And the New Testament, of course, would never have been written.

No one can imagine what our world would be like today if Jesus had never lived, if every influence from his life, both direct and indirect, were erased from the total picture. And yet practically all that we know, and probably all that ever will be known, of that amazing life is contained in the four little booklets which stand at the beginning of our New Testament. Thousands of volumes have been written about him, scholarly research has been devoted to the study of what he said and did, sermons are being preached about him every day, his significance for every detail of life is being constantly sought, countless lives are being influenced and even re-created by him, hundreds of organizations are dedicated to his service. The cumulative effect is overwhelming. And yet it all rests back ultimately upon those four little booklets, for aside from some knowledge of the environment in which he lived, there is no other source upon which to draw.

## THE FINAL REVELATION

We are thinking of the fact that the Bible still speaks to our day. If our imaginations could adequately grasp the significance of Jesus for the world, the significance which he ought to have and also the significance which he already has, and if we could realize that all our knowledge comes from the four gospels, we would have made our case for the relevancy of the Bible, and little more would need to be said.

The familiar old records seem so simple and undramatic as we read them. The stories have become as familiar to Bible readers as folk tales. We have known about the humane Samaritan, the boy who took his share of the estate and left his father broken with grief, the smug Pharisee thanking God that he was so good while he was actually being outranked by an outcast, the sower who scattered his seed on different kinds of soil—all these have we known from our youth up, and also the incidents which are interwoven with the teachings: the acts of marvelous power, the simple, homely deeds of helpfulness, befriending an adultress, rebuking the proud, and so quickly losing his life because he had angered those in authority. It is a simple story often told, and it scarcely seems credible that it should be so important. And yet most of what is best in our world stems from it, and those who fail to read the four little pamphlets which tell about it are neglecting the books which have been the most influential in all literature, and which some would say (as Renan said of Luke) are the most beautiful in all the world.

### *As Others Saw Him*

Recent study of these gospels has produced some results which have been quite disconcerting. It has become

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## THE FINAL REVELATION

We are thinking of the fact that the Bible still speaks to our day. If our imaginations could adequately grasp the significance of Jesus for the world, the significance which he ought to have and also the significance which he already has, and if we could realize that all our knowledge comes from the four gospels, we would have made our case for the relevancy of the Bible, and little more would need to be said.

The familiar old records seem so simple and undramatic as we read them. The stories have become as familiar to Bible readers as folk tales. We have known about the humane Samaritan, the boy who took his share of the estate and left his father broken with grief, the smug Pharisee thanking God that he was so good while he was actually being outranked by an outcast, the sower who scattered his seed on different kinds of soil—all these have we known from our youth up, and also the incidents which are interwoven with the teachings: the acts of marvelous power, the simple, homely deeds of helpfulness, befriending an adultress, rebuking the proud, and so quickly losing his life because he had angered those in authority. It is a simple story often told, and it scarcely seems credible that it should be so important. And yet most of what is best in our world stems from it, and those who fail to read the four little pamphlets which tell about it are neglecting the books which have been the most influential in all literature, and which some would say (as Renan said of Luke) are the most beautiful in all the world.

### *As Others Saw Him*

Recent study of these gospels has produced some results which have been quite disconcerting. It has become

increasingly evident that for all the importance which attaches to Jesus in the history of the past and in the life of today, we do not know nearly as much about him as we have thought we knew. Some would even say that we know almost nothing at all. We cannot be sure of the words which he spoke, and we cannot reconstruct any consecutive record of his life. His death is considered central in the thinking of all his followers, and yet scholars cannot agree as to who was responsible for his death nor what the reasons were.

This uncertainty is due very largely to the realization that we do not have any manuscripts from Jesus, nor even any accounts from his contemporaries. The records which we have are from approximately half a century later, and they record in large part the way in which Christ was preached to the gentile world. We have Jesus as he appeared to the later evangelists, and as they wanted him to appear to their hearers.

This is a serious problem for those who would recover the historic Jesus. It is a problem to which a great deal of study has been devoted, with emerging results which are less radical than was at first feared. But the problem scarcely concerns our study, for we are here interested not in reconstructing history but in reading the Bible. It is not the Jesus behind the records with which we are now concerned, intriguing as that study is, but the influence of the records themselves, just as they are, and just as they will continue to be read through the ages. And we may be sure that the actual character of Jesus shows through. We can recognize his features behind the curtain. Few people have any serious doubts as to what kind of person he was, what he believed in, what were his values, what kind of God he

worshiped. Though the hand may be the hand of the literary critics, we will recognize the voice as the voice of the Lord. In spite of the uncertainties which criticism has legitimately created, no one has constructed a different, rival interpretation of the personality of Jesus and of the kind of life he lived. If, like Mary, we are tempted to complain that they have taken away our Lord and we know not where they have laid him, we need, like Mary, only to raise our eyes to see him standing beside us, and in the silence we still hear him speak.

We know him as others saw him, and as they wanted their hearers to see him. But on second thought this should not disturb us. If it were possible, we would gladly have more objective records. But even if they came from his own generation, and from eyewitnesses who were with him throughout his ministry, we would still have only interpretations. What else *could* we have, unless he had written his own autobiography? All that his contemporaries could have told would have been what they saw in him. And some of his contemporaries saw him as Satan incarnate. When the preacher today invites people to become followers of Jesus, he has to interpret him to them, and the Jesus whom they follow is Jesus as the preacher sees him and interprets him. Only so can we know anybody. The neighbors living on the two sides of a person may know the same person and yet not have identical pictures of him. Each picture may be true, and each may be significant, and yet each is colored by the person who does the seeing. In fact, merely to know the facts would not necessarily be to know the person. It is not until we begin to interpret those facts that the real person begins to emerge.

So we know the Jesus whom the evangelists found and

## STILL THE BIBLE SPEAKS

told us about in their little books, and it is he that has influenced the world. Each of these gospels asks us to become his follower because the author has found him to be worthy of being followed. John Knox has reminded us of the significance of the fact that they remembered him. It is an obvious fact, unaffected by any critical study, that he was the kind of person who could not be forgotten. After his life had ended and he had left the earth, he could not be dismissed as merely a past incident, swallowed up in history. They had to keep on thinking about him, and talking about him, and trying to tell each other what he had meant to them. And that the church continues to do to this day.

In this lies the significance for us of much that they said about him. The virgin-birth story, for instance, gives offense to many today, and we readily admit that if those two little narratives in Matthew and Luke which tell about it had not been included in those books, we would not be aware of any vacuum, and Jesus would be just as truly divine to us as he now is. But the important thing is that Matthew and Luke *did* tell the story. Birth of a heavenly father was a not uncommon way to explain men who seemed to be more than merely men. Pythagoras was thought to have been born of a virgin, and Alexander the Great, and others. And those who had come to know something about Jesus wanted the world to know that he was more truly divine than any philosopher or warrior. If anyone was ever born of God, he was.

Something of the same sort is true of the resurrection story. It does not so much matter in just what form he appeared to them—whether it was physical body which ate fish by the lakeside or a spiritual body which

appeared through closed doors; whether he was so much the same that his scars were still visible, or so different that his best friends could not recognize him after one day's absence. The essential thing is that they knew he was alive. Only those who believed in him could catch the vision; he did not appear to Pilate or Judas or Caiaphas.

So they have told us about him as they saw him, and we go back to their records over and over because we would see what they saw. Mark was writing for Romans. To them, the primary characteristic of the gods was power. The gods had power to do what mortals could not do, and even among themselves there was gradation on the basis of power. Jupiter, the greatest of the gods, was the most powerful. Mark was familiar with all this, but in Christ he had found a power which far surpassed that of the pagan gods. At the very beginning of Mark's story Jesus meets and utterly defeats Satan, and throughout the rest of the book he is busy casting out Satan's demons until finally he probably—the original close of Mark's gospel has been lost—was taken in glory to heaven. This is, of course, an oversimplification of Mark, but it suggests what he found in Jesus. And from then till now men have gone back to the old story, for we are always confronted with demons, and we always need the power of God in dealing with them. Mark's book will never be out of date until someone brings us a more adequate power from conquering the demonic.

The author of Matthew was steeped in the religion of the Jews. To him, as to them, religion was obedience to the revealed will of God. New Testament Judaism was not making much of miracles. There were not many miracles in their scriptures aside from those connected



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with the three characters Moses, Elijah, and Elisha, and to those few which were recorded the rabbis of New Testament times paid little attention. The important thing was that God had taken Moses up on a mountain and told him how he wanted people to live. To follow that way of life was the essence of religion and the purpose of life.

Then our author found Jesus, and in him he saw a way of life far higher than anything that Moses had taught. Here was God's supreme revelation of life. Matthew loved to point the contrast. "It hath been said by them of old time . . . But I say unto you." And we are still going back to Matthew's gospel to find in Jesus what he found there. His picture appeals so strongly that many people have too easily identified the whole of the gospel message with his version of the Sermon on the Mount. Like Matthew we want to find the way he went and taught others to go, and Matthew's book will never be out of date until someone comes who can show us a still better way.

Luke has his picture of Jesus, not contradicting the others, but emphasizing those things which were especially significant to him. To mention only one feature, Luke was interested in Jesus' concern for the underprivileged. In the first sermon which Luke records, Jesus claims for himself the fulfillment of Isaiah's beautiful prophecy:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
For he has consecrated me to preach the good news to the  
poor,  
He has sent me to announce to the prisoners their release  
and to the blind the recovery of their sight,

To set the down-trodden at liberty,  
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19.)

Luke alone tells us of the good Samaritan who was preferred above the priest and the Levite, of the prodigal son and his joyous welcome home, of the beggar who went to Abraham's bosom while Dives was in torment, of the publican who was justified while the proud Pharisee was condemned, of Jesus' defense of the sinful woman and his rebuke of his own smug host, of that version of the Beatitudes which blessed the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the hated. Luke's book will never be out of date so long as cruelty and hardness abound, and those who are crushed need a champion and a comforter.

John looks at Jesus and sees in him the incarnation of the eternal Word of God. From the beginning of creation God's power has been at work in the world, creating and sustaining and directing. And now, at last, here is Jesus. In him this ever-active power which radiates from God himself has come to live as a man in human form, and "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." God has always been expressing himself in the things he has been doing and in the messengers he has sent, but here is the full and final expression of God. To know him is to know what God is like, for he that hath seen him hath seen the Father. John's book will never be out of date until some more authentic Word can be found, through whom God can speak even more fully to men.

These are, of course, not attempts to analyze or describe the four gospels. They are only suggestions that these writers found in Jesus the answers to their needs,

many more needs than I have named, and that their needs are our needs, so that we will continue to go back to these most priceless of all writings to warm our hearts in the presence of the Lord.

A few years ago Mrs. Anne Byrd Payson published a most interesting case study in personal religion, *I Follow the Road*. She was a wealthy and cultured resident of New York City. Her favorite musician seems to have been Bach, and one of her philosophical interests was Descartes, which facts vouch for her artistic and intellectual achievements. But according to her own account, she had never had any interest in the church or organized religion.

One night by chance she read one of E. Stanley Jones's books, and it made a profound impression on her. Not being able to shake the mood off, she invited Dr. Jones to visit her, which he did. She told him of her strange experience, and when he said that she had been converted, she asked him what she should do next. That was his field, and he should know. She knew music, and if some beginner had gone just so far, she would know what were the steps to be taken next. Was it not fair to expect the specialist in religion to take her where she was and show her the next steps to be taken in her religious development?

Dr. Jones did an inspired thing. He told her to take the four gospels which tell about Jesus—the rest of the Bible could wait—and spend a fixed amount of time each day reading them and trying to understand their meaning for life. The result was a transformation so complete that Dr. Jones asked her to write the book which tells of it.

The challenge which Dr. Jones gave is always safe.

There is probably not a person living who could, over a considerable period of time, spend twenty minutes a day in the presence of Jesus as the gospels have pictured him without having his life profoundly influenced by him one way or another. There is so much spiritual power there that one cannot be exposed to it and remain casually indifferent.

We have mentioned the gospels because it is from them that we have our information of Jesus' earthly life. But in a somewhat broader sense all the New Testament writers are telling what they found in him. Paul had a passion for morals, and he has given us one of the classical pictures of what it is like to have that inner moral tension unresolved. And then he met Jesus, and he found in him an ethical victory which sent him singing triumphantly through the rest of his life. His letter to the Romans, which is in large part a telling of his own struggle and his victory in Christ, was the inspiration of Martin Luther and the Protestant movement. Later, when John Wesley was hearing Luther's commentary on this letter read, his "heart was strangely warmed," and Methodism was born. Again, when Karl Barth saw his world tumbling about him after the First World War, he went back to this same letter for his inspiration, and one of the most significant religious movements of our times was launched. The spiritual power of the Christ who set Paul free from the law of sin and death, and who through Paul continues to awaken the spiritual energies of people from age to age—that power has not been exhausted, and serious people will continue to go back to Paul that he may take them back to his Lord.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews has shown

us what Jesus meant to him. His Bible was full of instructions as to how to find God through the mediation of priests and the offering of sacrifices. Then he saw Jesus, and it seemed that everything else had been pointing forward to that climax. Priesthood found its fulfillment in the perfect access to God through Christ, and the sacrificial system merely pointed forward to him as the perfect sacrifice. All history had been moving forward to him as its climax.

The seer of Patmos saw his vision of the end when every power opposed to Christ, on earth and under the earth, would be exterminated, and a redeemed world, free from sin and sorrow, would live in perfect bliss.

These are suggestions of the things which Jesus meant to those early writers. All had found Jesus, and in him all had found life. Of course he spoke to different ones in different tones. Their needs differed, and their thinking was not all alike. But they have all borne their testimony that without him life failed to satisfy; that with him they were victors, for faith in him was the victory which overcame their world. The miracle is that within a few years after he had lived and had left the earth, so many people, of such different types, were finding in him the answers to their spiritual needs, and that the records which they have left in the New Testament have continued to meet the spiritual needs and to create the spiritual ideals of people down through the ages.

### *The New Revelation*

We are constantly reminded that Jesus was not as original as some have thought him. He himself claimed that he was merely bringing to fulfillment the law and the prophets, and the student of later Judaism finds

him repeating the teachings of the rabbis to such an extent that the claim is sometimes made that every teaching of Jesus can be paralleled in the teachings of those who had gone before him. Possibly Jesus himself would have been quick to assent to this, for he seemed to attach little importance to mere originality and a great deal of importance to those who had gone before him.

One conspicuous exception must be made. Professor C. G. Montefiore, the famous Jewish scholar of England, was infatuated with Jesus, if such a verb may be allowed. In his several valuable books about Jesus he is constantly drawing on his knowledge of Judaism to show how closely the teachings of Jesus resembled those of the rabbis. But more than once Professor Montefiore calls attention to one feature in the teachings and the practice of Jesus which did not belong to his Jewish background. This feature was Jesus' constant identification of himself with the outcasts. The religion of the rabbis was different. Its very purpose was to draw a protective circle around the righteous and save them from contaminating contacts. We teach the same idea to children. They should not associate with other children who have bad habits and use bad language. Our youth should not associate with drunkards and prostitutes. Religion would save their souls by saving them from association with those who might ruin their souls.

Such was the religion of Jesus' day. They were to come out and be separate. The name "Pharisee," which was given to their most representative party, seems to have meant "Separated," and the ideal of religion was found in separating themselves from everything evil.

It is not surprising that Jesus shocked them. They



numbered him with the transgressors, and complained that he was not careful about the company he kept. It was something new that the good, instead of being satisfied with being good, should go out and seek the bad.

Professor Montefiore recognizes this as a striking originality in Jesus. But it is more than a detail, one more good feature added to the others. Such a difference rests back upon a wholly different conception as to the nature of God, a different idea as to what goodness is, and a different meaning for all of life. It is not one feature in the life and teachings of Jesus; it is Jesus. It is just for this that the world has always loved him, and because of this that he can save the world. The church has believed in the sinlessness of Jesus, but it has never gotten very excited about it. Mere absence of sin is at best a terribly negative sort of thing, and if we attribute sinfulness to thoughts as well as to actions, it is not a very intelligible idea. For all temptation involves the appeal of sin which must be rejected, and yet without temptation there could be no moral character at all.

The warm glow has always been generated, not by the Jesus who kept himself free from overt sin, but by the Jesus who was the friend of publicans and sinners, and who came to save the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Even when the church came to write its more academic doctrines, it preserved the basic idea that he had suffered himself that sinners might be saved. The whole evangelistic and missionary passion of Christianity, so different from the mood of many other religions, is a direct heritage from the Jesus who was not satisfied to be good, but who sacrificed his life seeking those who were not good.

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When we compare Jesus, not with rabbinic Judaism, but with the standards in the supposedly more cultured Greco-Roman world, the contrast is more striking. Reference has been made to resemblances between Jesus and some of the Greek moralists. But the contrast is at the crucial point where Jesus expresses his ideas of God and of man. The gentiles loved the masterful virtues. They were the master race, and they expected to be obeyed. All gentlemen owned slaves, and they should be able to control slaves and demand their service. They served the state best by recognizing authority and enforcing it. They should be strong, self-sufficient, accustomed to demanding and receiving respect. Pity was a slave virtue, and mercy was largely sentimentality. Love was not even an ethical word.

We are too familiar with the way in which Jesus inverted all this to be properly impressed by it. We have become so accustomed to Jesus' standards, whether we conform to them in our personal conduct or not, that when Nietzsche revived the ethics of the master race we were not at first sure whether he was serious. To him, as to the Romans, virtue was found in power, and weakness was sin. It is not surprising that to him Christianity, with its pity and its concern for the unfortunate, was the most damnable movement in modern times.

Speaking of the spread of Christianity into the Roman world, Lecky says, "For the first time, Christianity gave servile virtues a foremost place in the moral type. . . . For the first time, under the influence of Christianity, a great moral movement passed through the servile class." Jesus did not use the word "love" often, but when Paul used it to describe what he had found in Jesus, he put a flavor into the word which it had not had before.

*Power of Personality*

Jesus' teachings went beyond those of his Jewish and gentile backgrounds, and in a profoundly significant way. But that is not all the story. The simple fact is that even where they were in general agreement, the world has listened to Jesus and forgotten the others. Though the rabbis have many sayings that are very much like the sayings of Jesus, only the scholar now knows what they were or where they could be found. The rabbi could not convert the world to his wisdom.

Similarly, the gentile moralists had taught many of the ideals which Jesus taught—though there is no probability of conscious borrowing here as there probably was when Jesus followed the rabbis of his own people. But one of the conspicuous things about those ancient philosophers was their inability to make their ideas current among their contemporaries. They existed as little groups apart, practicing their virtues in a vacuum, while the people followed their natural and more worldly impulses almost oblivious of their existence and practically untouched by their preachments. The philosophers had all the advantage over Jesus so far as means of publicity were concerned. His little Palestine was a corner, and his followers were not scholars or teachers. And yet Jesus' influence infiltrated society so naturally that in a little while it was being said that he made the slaves live like the philosophers.

"The power of ideas rests in their ability to spread." Here the rabbis and the philosophers failed except for small groups of followers, while Jesus goes on winning men generation after generation. And it is not enough to explain the difference in influence by the fact that

Jesus' teachings were canonized into scripture and have therefore come to be familiar while the teachings of others remain inaccessible and therefore unknown. The case is quite as much the other way around. There was originally no purpose to canonize anything of the life and teachings of Jesus. A century later the records began to be treasured because Jesus had won so many followers. The converts explain the canonization to a greater degree than the canonization explains the converts. Jesus' ability to appeal to people made the gospels into scripture.

Probably we must fall back on the word which is anathema to so many, and attribute it to the "personality" of Jesus. We do not like the word in serious discussions of psychological matters, for we cannot define it, cannot analyze it, and have no yardstick by which to measure it. But that may be the fault of our limited knowledge rather than any reflection on personality. Explain it as we will, we know that people affect us differently, and the difference is not always subject to accurate analysis. Two teachers teach the same thing, but one creates interest for the subject while the other stirs opposition. The subject matter may be the same, but there is a difference in their attitude toward the things they teach, and in their attitude toward those whom they teach. One is creative, and the other is not. The person to whom we respond is much more than the sum of the characteristics which we can list, and incalculably more than the sum of the ideas which we may associate with him.

There was in Jesus that which won people to him while he was on earth. The common people heard him gladly, as they did not hear the rabbis or the philos-

ophers. One reason for the opposition of the Pharisees was that he was so much more popular with the people than they. And after he had left the earth, he was still able to project himself into the future and win converts after the rabbis and the philosophers had been forgotten.

It does not so much matter how we explain it, if explain it we must. There are many different explanations in the New Testament itself, and none of them is entirely satisfactory to us. Some said that the Spirit of God had entered into him. That may be a good way of stating it. Paul said that he was himself that Spirit. "The Lord is the Spirit." Jesus himself said that the words which he spoke, he spoke not of himself. It was God speaking through him. And why not? If, with Jesus, we believe that all good comes from God, then even the little good that is in us is God in us, and in Jesus God has made himself more appealing and more winsome than anywhere else in all his creation. We feel the tug of his magnetism without bothering to explain it, and when we read the old story over and over again, we know that God is speaking to us, for our hearts burn within us as we walk in the way with him.

### *Will Jesus Be Surpassed?*

This question is frequently asked, especially among young people. If Jesus was but one in a long series of revelations which God has made, may the series not be continued, and others come after him just as others went before him? Jesus surpassed every revelation which had been made up to his time. He even surpasses every revelation since his time. Granted. But is there any guarantee that he is the ultimate revelation of God for all time? And is it necessary for Christian faith that it

hold to such a view? As Jesus brought a fuller and more adequate revelation of God than Moses had brought, may it not be that we will some day have a still more perfect revelation? We think of Jesus as final because he is final for us, but so did the ancient Jews think of Moses as final, and they could not imagine Jesus any more than we can imagine his successor.

And going a step further, is it not inevitable that we have progressive insights into eternal truth, changing as human nature and social relationships change? If Jesus showed God as he could be seen in the world of the first century, does not the twentieth century need newer insights, and will not the fortieth century demand something different still?

Young people love such speculations, partly because they seem so logical, and partly because they seem broad and liberal—and just a bit daring. Such questions are fair, and they imply a certain amount of truth since society does make moral progress and cannot be forever tied to a fixed, static pattern. But for our present interest in Bible study, they are irrelevant. We are not concerned with theological speculations, but with the reading of the Bible as we have it, the Bible in which Jesus is central.

If God can make a more perfect revelation of himself than he has made, then certainly Christian people should be the last to object. The more we can know about God, the better. Certainly our present knowledge is limited enough, and we should be glad for every scrap of insight that can be added. And no one is interested in setting limits to the power of God and saying that he *could* not do anything that he might think wise.

But it is enough for our purpose that we take the very

pragmatic position that down to date Jesus has no successful rivals, and none seems apt to appear in the immediate future. With no claim to theological omniscience, we may at least acknowledge that the world is spiritually sick, and since no other doctor is at hand, and since Jesus seems to have just that spiritual cure which is so much needed, we can dispense with speculation until we have let him cure our illness. Men are exhausted and confused, and they have much to gain by going back to One who has been the physician of souls through the centuries, and whom we naturally trust because he has so often proved his amazing power to heal. If a greater than he should one day appear, then our posterity will be grateful for the greater blessings which he will bring with him.

But as we go back and reread the story of Jesus, there are some considerations which inevitably come to mind in this connection.

1. Jesus dealt with basic principles of life, not with their application in given situations. Similarly, the laws of logic provide the unchanging basis of argumentation, and with them as foundation, constantly new conclusions are being reached. The axioms of mathematics remain the same, and even so modern a thing as the atomic bomb could be produced because they could be depended on. The law of gravity is changeless (even though man's formulation of it may be quite imperfect), and because it is eternally changeless we can have such novelties as airplanes flying over the water, ships sailing on it, and submarines diving under it.

As we have in the physical world changeless principles with constantly new applications, so in the realm of the spirit we may believe that Jesus has brought to light

changeless, timeless principles of life which will continue to find new applications down the ages, but which will never be superseded. Jesus never heard of the democratic state, nor of modern industry, nor of colleges, nor orphan asylums, nor hospitals, nor community chests. But he has released in society the spiritual ideals which are involved in all these things, and others too many to name. He did not tell us all things when he was here, but he promised the spirit of truth, which would lead us into all truth. He has given us the sense of direction, and the power to walk in it. And when we find new areas for the application of his principles, we are not making him out of date. We are only making him more effective.

This is one reason for not going to Jesus as an authority in the usual sense, as one who has worked out all the problems and has all the answers waiting for us. Most of our problems he never heard of, at least not in the form in which they confront us. But it is intriguing to notice how constantly our social development is in the direction of the insights which he had long ago back in his quiet little Palestine. There are few problems of which we can ask, "What did Jesus say?" There is no problem of which it would not be relevant to ask, "What is the Christlike thing to do?" And in every case the answer would point a great step forward. We do not seem to be in danger of going beyond him until we can first catch up with him.

2. This means that our evolution is toward Jesus, not away from him. It is true that when we read of him in the Bible we are carried back into a queer little world which is strange and antique. We cannot understand the people to whom he spoke without some study and con-



siderable use of the imagination. And he, if he could be transported into our world, would be utterly confused. He might even be pardoned if he should feel at first that he was bewildered by its complexity and had little to say to it.

And yet, we are not leaving him in this antiquated past and moving on to something more modern. On a deeper level, we are moving in his direction, toward him. Our age is probably more like him morally than were the Middle Ages, and in moving a thousand years farther from him in time we have come nearer to him in spirit. And the most progressive phases of our life are those that approach him most nearly. The men whom we recognize as the finest flower of our culture are the men who have to a conspicuous degree incarnated his principles. The institutions which are pointing the way for the future are those which have learned most from him. We do not have a Christian civilization, but our glory and our hope is that we are gradually approaching Christianity.

3. It is interesting that Jesus has never had to be corrected on the basis of later developments, as have geniuses in other fields. Sir Isaac Newton was one of the geniuses of all time, and his discoveries set the world forward in the eighteenth century. But two centuries have passed, and any college student can explain the mistakes in Newton's law of gravity. It usually belongs to the geniuses to pioneer the way, and then lesser lights can check on what they have done and correct it. A pygmy can see farther than a giant if he can stand on the giant's shoulder.

But Jesus has not been corrected nor improved upon in nineteen centuries. Sydney Lanier pleads for some flaw which he can forgive. And we are not in much dan-

ger of outgrowing him if we cannot detect the flaws in all these years.

4. The men who have climbed highest are the ones who are least conscious of rivaling Jesus, and are least inclined to compare themselves with him. We who are more sophomoric may speculate on the possibility of a greater than he, but men of great spiritual maturity are more and more impressed with his uniqueness, and they bow in humility before him. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick has been quoted a number of times as saying that if one of the great of the earth should come into his office, a president of the United States or a king of another country, he would immediately stand out of respect, but if Jesus should come into his office, he would fall on his knees in reverence. Great souls are great enough to appraise his greatness, and they emphasize the gulf that there is between him and lesser mortals.

*For the Healing of the Nations*

Everyone who writes or speaks about our age reminds us that we are in a critical era. And undoubtedly they are right. It is certainly fashionable now to be alarmist, and possibly it is justified. But most ages are crucial, and seem to be confronted with momentous issues. The ages which are not crucial are stagnant, and stagnation is near to death. It may be that in the long run it will be seen that our age is more significant for the fact that it is coming awake. Conditions may exist for a long time without being problems; they become problems only when they become intolerable and an attempt is made to do something about them. Possibly the most important thing is that we are beginning to see where some dan-

gers lie, and are beginning to realize that they must be met immediately and intelligently.

We are being told over and over that ours is a secular age, a "sensate culture," and undoubtedly it is. But we have been going in that direction for generations, certainly ever since the steam revolution. And in the main we have been proud of it. Measuring our civilization in terms of things, we have forgotten to ask what we might be doing to people.

But we are asking now. We *must* ask, or face the consequences. And if we are intelligent enough, and self-disciplined enough, we may make ours an age when, as in the days of the Revolution and of the Civil War, the result of crisis will be that old evils are ended and better days are made possible. "Crucial" implies the possibility of great good as well as of great evil. And certainly there have never been so many seers trying to detect the shape of things to come, nor so many prophets urging people to make ready for the "day of the Lord."

There seems to be increasing agreement that the new day must be ushered in by spiritual means. The good earth will need a great deal of machinery, but no amount of machinery will make the earth good. The chief reliance in times past has been on warfare, and it is probably still the chief reliance in the thinking of a surprising number of people. But surely we have had time enough to discover that the function of war is not construction, but destruction, even though it sometimes destroys things which need to be destroyed. And warfare today has become too horrible even to contemplate.

A little while back we were sure that education would cure the world's ills. Only day before yesterday as history knows time it was a new venture—this experiment

in educating everybody and not only the favored few. Horace Mann cried with the enthusiasm of an evangelist, "Give me schools! Give me schools! Give me schools, and I will abolish crime!" Now we have schools, and instead of stupid criminals, we have educated criminals. The best educated country in the world has been the worst criminal in modern times. When we take a crook and educate him, the result is simply an educated crook, not a saint.

Industry has been hailed as our Messiah. Poverty and need were at the root of most evil, and now at last we had the resources and the ability, for the first time in history, to satisfy all basic needs. A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage would bring in the acceptable year of the Lord. But it is painful even to think of what the world of industry is doing as these words are being written.

Science has failed less than the others, for it has done with conspicuous success the things which it undertook to do. But the purpose of applied science is merely to multiply power, and we are all nervously aware that there is nothing in power to guarantee safety.

Democratic institutions were thought to be the answer. If those drunk with sight of power could be eliminated, and free peoples could be left to govern themselves under free institutions, then they could be trusted to do away with greed and brutality, and to live together as neighbors. But free democratic institutions do not seem to be working very well anywhere on earth right now.

Does it seem incongruous to suggest that we stop and read the Bible? Warfare and defense, education, big business, science, democracy—all these are the works of men's hands, and when we depend on them alone for

our salvation, we are worshipping idols. Dare we introduce the quaint old Bible into the company of all these modern and powerful forces, and suggest that we ask it to give us the judgment of God on it all?

The Bible has the answer, or at least one primary condition of finding the answer, for we can never fashion the good earth out of bad people. Only as we can change the natures of people, individual people one by one, can we get the raw material, so to speak, out of which any good society can be made. And we have been giving our attention and our energies to everything except those quiet, undramatic forces which can make Christ-like people.

Jesus faced that temptation. At the beginning of his ministry he saw all the kingdoms of the world spread out before him, and himself the ruler of them all. It was a wonderful opportunity. Think what the world would be like if Jesus made all its laws and determined all its customs! But he knew better. He called the temptation a device of Satan, and he turned to the pathetically slow task of having each individual person be reborn into Christlikeness.

Jesus has the secret, and the Bible is the only place where we find him. If we can get our people back to these little books, they will begin to discover that there is no other name given under heaven among men whereby they can be saved. And if we accustom ourselves to associating with the Jesus of the Bible, we will soon find ourselves living in the atmosphere of God, and eternity will be in our hearts.

Our little systems have their day and cease to be, but from everlasting to everlasting is God. And when we

## THE FINAL REVELATION

let Jesus teach us his secret, we orient our little lives around the eternal purposes of God. Then we see him eternally at work, from the beginning and until now, leading men as fast as he can induce them to follow, into the blessed kingdom of God.

## THE FINAL TRIUMPH

IN THE DAYS OF SCHLEIERMACHER, POSSIBLY THE GREATEST of modern theologians, religion had sunk to so low a level in popular esteem that he based his appeal for a hearing on its unpopularity. Surely anything which the people disliked so much must be important enough to investigate and to understand. They could not dislike it intelligently without understanding it.

One could make a similar appeal for apocalypticism today, for probably no feature of New Testament thinking is so uncongenial to our modern mood.

Biblical apocalypticism is really a cluster of ideas. At the center of it is the expectation of a sudden, cataclysmic end of the present world order, and the beginning of an entirely new supernatural era. Such an idea is anathema to our scientific assumptions, according to which each future is expected to grow causally out of its immediate past, and a final end and a totally new beginning are unthinkable.

With this central idea were associated the expected coming of a heavenly Being with supernatural power for the destroying of all evil from the world, the resuscitation of the physical bodies of the dead and their return to this earth, and the Great Assize at which every individual would be judged according to the deeds done in the flesh and given his appropriate award.

Of course this apocalyptic type of thought has never died out of the church. Primitive though it seems, it is still perpetuated by religious bodies, by schools, and by

a continuous stream of literature. And the excessive zeal of many of its advocates has undoubtedly made it even more unpopular than it might otherwise have been. A teacher who was to address a group of preachers on the Book of Revelation was told in advance by two of them that they hoped he could say something to make them feel more kindly toward that book, for they had thoroughly disliked it from childhood. And a famous theological professor once referred to it as "a horrible book to have in a Christian Bible." Probably a large majority of Christians, despairing of finding anything in it that could possibly minister to their Christian faith except the letters to the seven churches and the closing description of the New Jerusalem, treat the rest of the book as one of the unsolved mysteries and leave it severely alone.

But the problem is not limited to the Book of Revelation. Its seeds lie far back in the Old Testament, for while the Old Testament reached no fully developed eschatology, the later ideas grew naturally out of the national hope of the ancient Jews. During the century before the birth of Jesus that hope came to full flower, and the early Christian movement was based firmly on its apocalyptic expectations. Jesus sat rather lightly toward the Law, the other outstanding feature of first-century Judaism, and Paul and others of his followers repudiated it entirely. But the coming new Kingdom was the theme of Jesus' teaching, and he spoke freely of the resurrection and judgment which would accompany it. Jewish apocalypticism gave to Christianity its earliest thought forms.

Every book in the New Testament which is long enough to afford a basis for judgment, with the partial



exception of the Gospel of John, is predicated upon the expectation of the speedy end of this present evil age and the miraculous establishment of the age to come. The first three gospels are very explicit about the approaching Kingdom and the signs of its appearing. Paul was "waiting for our Lord Jesus Christ to reappear," and wanted his churches to "be found irreproachable when our Lord Jesus Christ comes." "First," he says, "those who died in union with Christ will rise; then those of us who are still living will be caught up with them on clouds into the air to meet the Lord." At the end, "we must all appear in our true characters before the tribunal of the Christ, each to be repaid with good or evil for the life he has lived in the body."

Similarly the Epistle to the Hebrews is sure that "the great Day is coming nearer," and that those who live in sin face "the dreadful prospect of judgment." And the Book of Revelation is one of the most perfect apocalypses which antiquity has bequeathed to us. The New Testament might almost be called a collection of apocalyptic tracts, and the tremendous strength of the early Christian movement was nourished on the faith that the day was at hand. All history was hurrying to its climax. The fulfillment of this hope was the consummation to which all the past had been moving and in which it would find its meaning. And as it would bring the past to its climax, it would usher in the bliss of the future.

### *The Origin of Apocalypticism*

Since this hope had its origin in Judaism, we must go back to the pre-Christian era to understand the causes which produced it.

The first of these causes was the collapse of the political institutions of Judaism. As far back as Amos, in the eighth century before Christ, the coming of the "Day of Jehovah" seems to have been a familiar expectation, and it was made much stronger in southern Judah by Isaiah's doctrine of the "Remnant." Jehovah was the God of Israel, and just in so far as they believed in Jehovah they must believe in the future ascendancy of his people. The only way for a God to "get glory to himself" was by making the people whom he sponsored glorious. Other peoples and their gods had had their days; the day of Jehovah and his people was yet to come. Regardless of what catastrophes might happen to them at the hands of their enemies, a remnant would always remain as the seed corn for a glorious future. Religion and patriotism, faith in their God and faith in their future as a nation, were thus two sides of the same coin.

But the subsequent unfolding of history was a progressive denial of this faith. In the eighth century they became vassals of Assyria, and as generation followed generation they sank lower and lower. After more than a century of subjection to Assyria, they became subject to Babylonia, then to Persia, then to Alexander the Great, to Egypt, to Syria. Almost seven centuries pass, and we find these hapless people without a king, without an army, without any resources whatever, occupying only a small part of what had once been the Land of Promise. Talk of their ruling the world was either comic or pathetic. What should they do?

There were two alternatives, and each was chosen by many of the Jews of the last two centuries before Christ. Some drifted entirely away from the old hopes which seemed so antiquated and unrealistic. They adapted

themselves to the civilization around them and identified themselves with their Gentile neighbors.

But others could not abandon their heritage so easily. Despairing of any resources in society to save itself, they threw it all into the lap of God, and expected a great cosmic miracle to set the world straight. No need now for a Son of David to lead victorious armies. Instead, there would come a supernatural Deliverer from heaven, accompanied by his angels, to destroy all evil and establish all good. No need for slow conquests on fields of battle, the inch by inch subjugation of hostile neighbors. Like all miracles, it would be instantaneous, "in a moment," "in the twinkling of an eye," like lightning flashing from one part of the heavens to another part. Always in the New Testament the coming of the Messiah and the setting up of the kingdom are represented as sudden.

And since it would be miraculous, man would have no part in establishing it. He would merely be the recipient, the beneficiary. It would be the Father's good pleasure to give them the Kingdom, but nowhere in the New Testament are men urged to set it up. Thus was the national hope changed from a dream of military and political conquest to the expectation of a miraculous re-making of the world.

A second factor which affected this hope was the Hellenization of the world after the conquests of Alexander the Great. In the earlier days Israel had been one kingdom among many, surrounded on all sides by other similar little political units. Her relations were "international" relations. She could be friendly toward one neighbor and hostile toward another. Military victory over them, one at a time, was not hard to imagine. It

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was thus that David had built up the kingdom of Israel in the beginning, and it was thus that foreign powers had come to have their "days." There was no reason why Israel, with Jehovah's help, might not some day conquer the world and bring it under the laws of Jehovah.

The Hellenization of the world which followed the conquests of Alexander changed this picture. Everywhere the so-called Greek culture was dominant, for Alexander was almost as successful a missionary as he was a general. Boundaries became unimportant, for wherever one looked he saw Greece. Greek art, Greek religion, Greek language, Greek philosophy, Greek games, Greek dress—these scarcely knew any frontiers. And if Europe in turn borrowed much from the East which it had overrun, this only served to make the civilization of the Mediterranean world more uniform. The books of the New Testament were written for people in many countries, but they were all written in Greek.

The struggle of the Jews now becomes a struggle of cultures rather than of armies. One by one, the other nations had succumbed to the fascination that was Greece, and as a result they had entirely disappeared. Like a tidal wave, Grecian civilization had swept over them and washed away their ancient ways of life. Would little Israel be able to survive where the rest of the world had failed? Would the ways of the world be able to put an end to the observance of the laws of Jehovah? In whatever direction the Israelite looked, he saw a world which had been Grecianized. The New Testament knows two kinds of people, Jews and Greeks. From the viewpoint of her religion and her sacred traditions, Judah felt that the rest of the world was hostile, and subtly dangerous—so dangerous, in fact, that a very

great many of the Jews themselves had yielded to this vivid Hellenistic culture and forsaken the ways of their fathers. It is not surprising that the loyal Jews came to think of this world as evil, an enemy to Jehovah and his laws.

A third influence which modified the Jewish hope was the discovery of the devil. His Satanic Majesty was not originally Jewish. There is probably not but one passage in the Old Testament, and that in the late book of Chronicles, where we have the regular orthodox devil with whom we have since then become distressingly intimate. The Satan of Job and Zechariah is one of God's chief angels in heaven, not an evil spirit.

Ancient Israel explained everything, good and bad, in terms of Jehovah. Drought or reviving rain, sickness or health, famine or abundance, defeat or victory—all were ascribed to Jehovah. Even the evil which men did was sometimes explained as his working. But as time went on this became increasingly difficult. The lot of the Israelites was usually hard, and so to a greater and greater degree Jehovah came to be thought of as the source of pain and suffering and frustration. But as the people grew in moral sensitiveness, it became increasingly difficult to hold their God responsible for the things of which they themselves disapproved.

It therefore came as a relief when they learned, probably from their Persian masters, to think in terms of *two* supernatural beings, one the author of good and the other of evil, Jehovah God and the devil. Now it was less difficult to account for all the evil in the world, or more accurately, for the fact that the world itself was evil.

This fit in beautifully with the cultural dualism of

the Hellenistic period. If there were two cultures in opposition to each other, the Jewish and the Greek, it was because they were fostered by two opposing supernatural powers. Judaism was the work of Jehovah; Hellenism was the work of the devil. And for the time being, Hellenism was in control of the world, and Judaism seemed in danger of being submerged. Naturally Paul calls the devil "the Prince of this world," and says that our warfare is against his minions, the demonic powers in high places.

The national hope of Israel has now gone over completely into the realm of the cosmic. Instead of military struggles between little nations, we have a struggle between God and the devil, the spirit of good against the spirit of evil in the universe. Religious faith is faith that the good will ultimately triumph, and that in the end God will be victorious over the devil. This means not merely a Jewish victory over Gentiles. It means the elimination of all evil, whether physical or moral, from the earth, for all evil is from the devil. And in its place all good will be established. God's will will be done on earth as it is already being done in heaven. And man will enjoy the benefits of this cosmic victory, living in a world from which all evil will have been removed and in which every good will be realized.

### *Apocalypticism Today*

As has been said, this whole apocalyptic outlook, with its extreme supernaturalism and its expectation of sudden cataclysm, is not congenial to modern thought. In at least two respects its influence in the area of religion has been definitely unfortunate.

One is its social defeatism and pessimism. One can

understand this attitude on the part of first-century Jews. After centuries of weakness and oppression, surrounded by a great hostile civilization, their land held by an army of occupation, it is not surprising that they lost faith in themselves and left it all to God.

But in extreme circles today this has become, not merely a feeling of the inadequacy of man's efforts to save himself, but a positive resentment toward his trying to improve his world. Apocalyptic cults oppose all efforts toward social melioration on the ground that they are expressions of man's pride and betray a lack of trust in God. Many even welcome moral deterioration, and pray that the world will rapidly become so evil that God will send apocalyptic salvation upon us. It does not occur to them that God might work *through* man's efforts rather than in spite of them.

A second unfortunate heritage has been the persistent effort to fix the date for the apocalyptic return of Christ. Date after date passes and nothing happens, but this hope deferred does not make the heart sick. With a faith which is amazing in its persistency, the date is just moved forward a little, and the watchful waiting goes on.

Such excesses make thoughtful people brush the whole apocalyptic scheme impatiently aside as the stupid relic of primitive crudeness, and one can scarcely blame them.

Certainly we are not interested in reviving this ancient scheme. But it exerted a tremendous influence upon the primitive Christians as well as upon the late Jews, and its more positive values are worth noting.

Apocalypticism made it possible to deal realistically with evil, and the world of the apocalyptists was mostly evil from their viewpoint. This presence of evil in a

world made and governed by a good God is, of course, one of the insoluble problems for religious thought. Some have denied the existence of evil. This is the best of all possible worlds, and what seems to us, with our little human vision, to be evil will in the end turn out to have been good.

Others have claimed that evil is merely the absence of good, just as darkness is the absence of light. Or it is a phase in the process of evolution, the holdover of the tiger and the donkey and the peacock in us, all of which we are happily outgrowing and for the existence of which we should scarcely be blamed. Or, again, evil has its source in God himself, and God is engaged in a moral struggle within himself as the good conquers the evil.

But the ancient did not try to explain evil away, and possibly that is one explanation of the stubborn survival of his scheme. Evil was evil; it was anti-God. It was bestial, and eventually it would be destructive. It was not part of the process of climbing up, but was the sure cause of going down to ruin. Evil was of the devil, devilish. The darker the picture, the more congenial it was to the apocalypticist. He frankly faced the world as it was, and said that it was the devil's doing. It is not surprising that apocalypticism is always revived in times of war and great catastrophe, when evil is so highly dramatized.

But while the apocalypticist faced evil frankly and did not try to camouflage it, he was perfectly confident of the final triumph of the good. If for the immediate future he was a pessimist, still for the ultimate outcome he was wholeheartedly optimistic. God would be utterly victorious, and all evil would disappear. The world would be the kind of world a good God would want,



because he had the power to make it so, and he would rule it in perfectness forever.

We look back with wistfulness akin to homesickness on this simple hope. We can say that good is more powerful than evil, but our world affords us uncertain basis for our faith, and we are uncertain how the power of goodness will express itself. We are on the side of the angels, but we find it hard to conceive an ultimate victory. A college boy said that he had listened to much preaching, and it sounded to him as though God and the devil were fighting for souls and the devil was winning out. Evolution has taken the place of cataclysm, but we find it hard to believe with Herbert Spencer that the movement is "always toward perfection," and to share the confidence of his contemporary who "believed in civilization and asked no other creed." Is there an end to evolution? Can we envision any final outcome to this terrible moral struggle, or is evil an ineradicable part of existence? Are we fighting day by day a battle against evil which God himself can not win? At least the ancient apocalyptist, facing a devilish world, had faith that the God who was in the shadow would some day be on the throne. We long to share his faith in some far-off divine event in which the whole process will triumphantly culminate, but we are confused and timid.

To mention only one other of the significant features of apocalypticism, it gave meaning to history. Its adherents were going somewhere, and in fact, they were about to arrive. History was not a series of endless cycles as it was to the Stoics, nor was it a meaningless march from nothing that we can imagine to nowhere in particular, as it is to some of our modern seers. Mark Twain

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said that history was "simply a brief and rather discreditable incident on one of the minor planets."

But the apocalypticist was headed for a goal. Eye had not seen, ear had not heard, nor had it entered into the imagination of man to conceive its glories, but eventually he would arrive, and the destination would make the whole journey worth while. History was a tour planned by God in the beginning, and it would come to a harbor which would more than justify all the pain and inconvenience on the way.

A world full of evil; the final triumph of the good; an ultimate destiny which justified the perilous venture of living—these the apocalypticist believed in, and in that faith he found the victory which overcame the world. The forms in which they were held two thousand years ago seem crude to us today, but we are not sure that our greater knowledge has given us anything equally satisfying to put in their place.

It is evident that Jesus' thought moved within this apocalyptic framework. Before some of his contemporaries should taste death, they would see the triumphant coming of the Son of Man. In the final judgment the sheep would be separated from the goats, and those who had prepared themselves by repentance and lives of righteousness would receive admission into the kingdom as their reward. Almost all of Jesus' parables are attempts to throw some light on the coming kingdom.

But three footnotes should be made to this apocalypticism of Jesus. The first is that he was free from feverish interest in predicting the date of the coming end. The Thessalonian church was affected by it after Paul's preaching, and they have had an unfortunate number of successors down to this day. But Jesus seems not to

have been interested in the calendar. When they asked him when it would take place, he answered quite simply that he did not know, and the angels in heaven did not know. But many moderns have claimed to be much better informed at this point than their Lord.

In the second place, Jesus did not share the apocalyptic pessimism. He believed in life, and believed in people. All his appeal was based on a sublime faith in the worth of even the humblest people and in their ability to respond to the high ideals which he preached. The soil in which he sowed the seed was adapted to its nourishment, and a harvest was certain. If spiritual truth was concealed from the learned and intelligent, it was still revealed to the babes. It would be the Father's good pleasure to give them the Kingdom, but the emphasis in that statement was not upon their helplessness but upon the Father's love. By repenting and becoming as little children people were already qualifying for the Kingdom, and the humble and the pure in heart were experiencing in advance the quality of its life. This emphasis on the ability of people to respond to his teachings here and now lies back of one of the perennial problems of the New Testament student, the fact that at times Jesus spoke of the coming Kingdom as being already in process of realization. It is not surprising that the influence of Jesus through the centuries has been to enhance the value of human life, not to depreciate it.

And further, it is interesting that Jesus never tries to suggest what life in the Kingdom will be like. Apocalyptic writings abound in descriptions of the beatific life. There are miraculous grapevines, and fields which produce of themselves without being worked, and beasts which turn vegetarian so as not to cause pain to their

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victims. There is the absence of all suffering, and all work, and all death. Our book of Revelation gives us the picture of a miraculous city with gates of pearl and streets of gold.

But though Jesus was always talking about the kingdom, he never described it. And the reason was that he was thinking, not of changed environments but of changed persons. The reign of God would be realized, not in a transformed world of nature, but in God's control of human hearts. And that was the reason he could occasionally speak of the Kingdom as already begun, for there were hearts in which God was already ruling. He was interested in the great spiritual values for which the apocalyptic dream stood, and he was definitely not interested in those phases of the hope which often make it so unpalatable today.

### *Visions of Victory*

The Book of Revelation in our New Testament is the classic expression of this apocalyptic hope in its Christian form, and as such it appropriately stands as the climax and conclusion of the Bible.

Probably most people think of Revelation as a book of horrors rather than of hope. The plagues of Egypt in the days of Moses were mere child's play compared with the terrible experiences which it predicts. War, famine, pestilence, collapse and chaos in the natural world around us, millions of demons belching up out of the sulphurous underworld with their supernatural powers for the torture of men—imagination goes bankrupt in attempting to pile up the horrors. As page follows page in multiplying the descriptions, it is not surprising that the child develops a definite hostility to the

book, and the scholar calls it unfit to be in a Christian Bible.

But this is a superficial judgment. When seen in better perspective, Revelation is positive, not negative. It is a promise of victory, not a threat of doom; a paean, not a dirge. As one of the really great classics of the religious imagination, it takes its place beside Job, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Like them it was never intended to be taken literally. The literalist simply ruins any one of them. But each one, if allowed to speak its own message in its own language, expresses profound religious faith in classic literary form.

The most frequent description of apocalypses is that they were "tracts for bad times." They were books of hope, written in times of crisis to encourage people to hold to their faith by promising speedy relief from present ills and enduring bliss to follow. And this is true of our Book of Revelation as it is true of all the other apocalypses. In spite of its forbidding appearance, it was written to reassure people and to strengthen their faith and hope. It was not written to tell them that troubles were coming. The faithful already knew that, and in fact the troubles had already begun to break upon their heads. But the good news was that this was the final end of all evil. The devil was about to make his last stand. He was throwing all his big guns and all his reserves into the fight, and they would not be enough. All evil was soon to pass forever out of the world, and God and his goodness would reign for ever and ever. There are more ecstatic shouts of "Hallelujah!" in Revelation than in all the rest of the Bible, and its celestial hymnody has enriched Christian worship through the ages. It is the shout of final triumph.

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The evils which must precede the end are the familiar "Messianic Woes," the woes which must usher in the Messianic age. This idea has been made familiar to us by the New Testament. We have heard so much about the wars and rumors of war, and other forms of evil which must precede the coming of the end, that whenever wars break out they revive the expectation of the return of Christ.

If this idea were not so familiar, it would seem quite irrational. The natural hope would be that things must get better, not worse. If we are some day to reach a final perfection, then it might be reasonable to expect that as we approach nearer and nearer to this blissful state, we would be getting better and better, so that it would be easy to take the last step over into perfection, and the end would be merely the conclusion of a process. But apocalypticism thinks otherwise. The good can arrive only on the heels of excessive evil.

The reason for this is simple. Since apocalypses were written to encourage people in bad times, they promised that the present evil under which the people were struggling would soon pass, and would be followed by the final bliss. From that there developed the sequence that the final consummation would follow immediately after an era of great suffering, and this came to be the fixed idea even when there was no suffering. The dawn of the new day could not come except after the darkness of night. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians that the kingdom could not possibly be realized *very* soon, for they had not yet had the day of evil, of Anti-Christ.

We can distinguish three classes among these "Messianic Woes," or woes which will usher in the Messianic kingdom, but it is not probable that the writers were

themselves conscious of such classifications. There will be woes which man will bring on himself, chiefly wars and the accompanying starvation and diseases. These receive scant recognition in Revelation, possibly because the long *pax Romana* had largely abolished war from the Mediterranean world. They occur chiefly in the few verses devoted to the Four Horsemen.

A second type of woe is found in the upheavals of nature, the waters turning bitter, the sun turning dark, mountains moving from their bases, and the like. There are many of these in Revelation, so many that they have produced confusion. It is an unanswered question whether some of them are out of place and should be rearranged in the interest of order, or whether they were intended to be scattered as they are.

The third type, and by far the most horrible, was the demonic woes, the hordes of evil spirits called up from the underworld for one last assault on men. The Christian fight had always, even from Jesus' day, been largely a fight against the demonic world. Paul said that he was fighting not against men, against flesh and blood, but against these spirits of evil.

Such are the evils which mark the approach of the Messianic age. In the persecution of the church by the Roman empire our author sees their beginning, and beyond them he sees salvation. Thank God, there will be no more delay. Soon the tabernacle of God will be with men.

### *The Roman Persecution*

It does not seem quite reasonable to us that Christianity should ever have been persecuted. It is such a respectable, dignified kind of religion, and so friendly. It

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teaches us to love everybody, and to help everybody. And even though other people might naturally not accept some of its teachings, there is nothing in them to inspire killing.

And yet Christianity was persecuted, and for more than two hundred years, a longer time than the United States government has been in existence. And the persecutions were not at the hands of thugs and gangsters, but rather by the "nice" people throughout the empire. The emperor Marcus Aurelius, one of the outstanding moralists of antiquity, was also one of the outstanding persecutors of Christianity, and the classes of people who make up our church membership today were in the main on the side of the persecution then. There were many reasons for this.

In the first place, the earliest spread of Christianity was among the so-called "lower classes" of society, and especially among the slaves. Slaves far outnumbered free citizens in the empire, and in such a situation, when a minority is trying to hold a majority in subjection, any kind of organization among the oppressed is an object of suspicion to their masters. Tacitus, a contemporary of Revelation, says that Rome was in constant fear of an uprising among the slaves, and this new religion might well furnish the impetus to set it in motion. The people in the upper classes were naturally suspicious of it.

Further, this new movement sounded like insurrection. These people were saying that the present government would soon be overthrown and a new order would take its place, and that is insurrection in any country. They were living under Rome, but they were always talking about a new Kingdom soon to come. Their ruler



was the reigning Caesar, but they were looking for their new ruler, Christ, to take over world dominion shortly. Many people have been killed for less treacherous preachments than this. The better people very definitely did not want their government overthrown.

Another common charge against these queer people sounds absurd to us, but it was taken very seriously by the people of Rome, and it is one of the charges about which the early defenders of the faith have most to say. The Christians were accused of being atheists, and of teaching their converts to be atheists.

This did not mean quite what the word means to us. The point was not that in theory they denied the existence of any God. But Rome took with thorough seriousness the idea that her empire was supported by her gods, and that its welfare was dependent upon their favor. The government itself had oversight over religions, and frequently appropriated money for their support. So important was it that the government have supernatural support that altars were erected to "The Unknown God" to guarantee the favor even of any god with whom they might not be familiar or whom they might have overlooked.

Of course all these gods expected the worship of the people, and they had terrible ways of avenging themselves if it should be withheld. To refuse worship to the gods would be as serious an offense against society as the spreading of disease germs would be to a modern doctor or the distribution of black magic and voodoo potents among savages. Rome would soon be full of angry gods, and any kind of national disaster might be the result. Such charges seem unrealistic to us, but to Rome in the first century they were of terrible importance.

Responsible people were not going to sit idly by while these fanatics imperiled their whole social structure.

Another ground for opposition to this queer new Christian movement was economic. It interfered with business. Next to war, religion was about the biggest business in antiquity. It is not an accident that a large percentage of the buildings which have come down to us from those early civilizations are temples or the ruins of temples. The houses in which the people lived, the palaces in which their kings lived, the places where they did their business and administered their government, these have succumbed to the gnawing teeth of time, but the homes of the gods were more nearly immortal. Add to the buildings the support of the army of priests and temple attendants, the costly and elaborate vestments, the steady stream of animals for sacrifices, the impressive processions, the traffic in idols, and countless other expenses, and the religion of antiquity can be seen to have involved large sums of money, and to have provided support for thousands of people.

Such things cannot be lightly interfered with. The Christians, by opposing the worship of the pagan gods, were threatening to take the lawful support from many innocent people, and they therefore made many enemies for themselves. The nineteenth chapter of Acts gives us an illuminating illustration. The making of little images of the goddess Diana, or Artemis as she was known in Greek, must have been only one of the many economic interests connected with that great temple, but when the missionary work of Paul interfered with the profits of the image maker's union, it precipitated a riot of the first magnitude. People do not let

their bread be taken out of their mouths without a struggle.

It was natural that all sorts of scandalous stories came to be told about these off-color Christians. In their communion services they talked about eating flesh and drinking blood, and it was soon common knowledge that they practiced cannibalism, offering human sacrifices and eating the flesh. The blood came in popular gossip to be the warm blood of freshly slain infants. "Love one another," and "Greet one another with a holy kiss" were the bases for stories of all sorts of lasciviousness. The refusal of the Christians to take part in some of the pagan celebrations of marriage led to the popular belief that they were opposed to marriage and the home, and therefore that they lived together in perpetual adultery. Tertullian wrote a whole book on the troubles caused by friction between the marriage customs of Christians and pagans.

It is not hard to see that these Christians were peculiar and dangerous people, and the rest of the population naturally suspected them. Because of the elements of pagan worship involved, they avoided the games, the emperor's birthday celebration, weddings and funerals, dinner dates, political office, service in the army, and much else.

When persecution drove them underground and made their services secret, of course the rumors grew apace, and almost everything bad was believed. They became social scapegoats. Lecky quotes Tertullian as saying:

If the Tiber ascends to the walls, or if the Nile does not overflow the fields, if the heaven refuses its rain, if the earth

quakes, if famine and pestilence desolate the land, immediately the cry is raised, "The Christians to the lions!" "There is no rain . . . the Christians are the cause" had become a popular proverb in Rome.

These scandals were all more or less vague, the popular opprobrium which attaches to unpopular sects. But there was one issue which was very definite, and very devastating. There was emperor-worship. Ever since the days of Augustus the worship of the Roman emperors had been more and more widely recognized.

To the people, the significance of this practice was certainly as much political as religious. Rome ruled an amazingly wide and diverse empire. From Scotland on the north to the cataracts of the Nile, and from Spain eastward to the edge of Parthia, all was Rome politically. These people had little in common except their loyalty to Rome. Their language, customs, and occupations differed as widely as possible. The only thing that made a unity of such diversity was that each was loyal to Rome, and this loyalty was in the main cordial, and even enthusiastic, for Rome had brought peace to the whole world, and a measure of prosperity and of culture which most of them had never known before.

The symbol of this unity was the emperor, much as the king is the symbol of the unity of the British Commonwealth today. Worship of the emperor was an expression of loyalty; refusal was defiance, or even rebellion. This worship was demanded especially of soldiers as a test of their loyalty, very much as soldiers to-day salute the flag.

The Christians were loyal citizens, but worship of the emperor was to them impossible religiously. They could

never worship any man. They therefore refused. And their refusal was popularly interpreted as disloyalty to the government, and made it easy to believe all the other rumors about them.

We have an interesting parallel today in the refusal of the Jehovah's Witnesses to salute the American flag. With them it is a matter of religion. They interpret any such salute as idolatry, and refuse on that ground. But to the rest of the Americans, or to many of them, it means that they are not loyal to the flag, and are therefore politically objectionable. Back in the third century the great Christian scholar Origen said of the Christians exactly what Jehovah's Witnesses are saying today, that they were not subject to military duty because every Christian was a priest.

### *The Final Triumph*

Thus were the lines drawn. The conflict was one between empire and church, and yet the inequality of the two sides makes the word "conflict" seem a bit absurd. On the one side was the church, for the most part poor and devoid of influence or power, outlawed by the state and persecuted by its officials. On the other side was the empire which was proud and irresistible, ruling the whole world as no power has ever ruled it since. Against this background the author of Revelation writes his shout of triumph because the power of the empire is doomed, and God and his church are about to take over the government of the world.

The two sides of this conflict were parallel throughout in our author's thinking. At the top and opposing each other were God and Satan, the Great Good Spirit and the Great Evil Spirit, equally supernatural though

## THE FINAL TRIUMPH

of course not equally powerful. The hostility between them is fundamental, and one or the other must eventually be destroyed.

Each has his earthly representative. God is represented by Christ and Satan by the emperor, who is as definitely inspired by Satan as is Christ by God. These two cannot both survive, and one must eventually destroy the other.

Each has his earthly realm, or organization. God rules over the church whose head is Christ, and Satan rules over the empire whose head is the emperor.

And each has the appropriate worship, the church worshipping Christ and the empire worshipping the emperor. And these, too, are mutually exclusive and cannot continue to exist side by side. A diagram may help to make the parallel systems graphic.

God	vs.	Satan
Christ	vs.	Emperor
Church	vs.	Empire
Christ worship	vs.	Emperor worship

This is the great day toward which all history has been moving. It is not surprising that our author becomes almost ecstatic in many of his descriptions. The Messianic Woes are here at last, as Satan and his minions make their last futile struggle for survival.

The dramatic sweep of the book is tremendous, and that is true whether we leave the woes in their present chaotic state or try to rearrange them in more logical sequence. While the author is writing, the Satanic forces are in control. Jerusalem, the Holy City, has been burned to the ground by victorious Rome, though that fact is not mentioned but only implied in the final resto-

ration of that city. Rome, the great harlot, rules the world, and the emperor oppresses the Christians with a rod of iron. And the immediate future will, of course, be blacker still. After a magnificent court scene, in heaven, God gives through Christ a revelation of these awful things which must accompany the end.

As mentioned above, the references to war and its attendant evils are brief. Human warfare could have little significance in such a struggle.

The predictions of upheavals in nature are horrible enough, but they are rather conventional, being borrowed in large part from earlier Jewish and Christian sources such as the description of the plagues in Egypt, the Little Apocalypse in Mark 13, and the like. And they are so scattered as to make orderly progress toward a final climax impossible without considerable rearrangement.

The release of the demons out of the underworld is postponed until the Christians can all be made exempt by the seal of Christ, for Christ has always had power over the demons, and his followers cannot be hurt by these supernatural visitors.

After the demons, we have Satan himself, with an explanation of his hatred of God and his fierce persecution of God's church.

The end is now near, and the destruction of this whole Satanic hierarchy is begun. First Rome, the earthly seat of all evil, is burned to ashes, not by human hands, but by the wrath of God. There are few descriptive passages more dramatic than the picture of the princes and the merchants and the navigators of the world standing at safe distance as the city burns, and bewailing the end of a civilization. Rome held the world

## THE FINAL TRIUMPH

together, but now Rome is no more, and the world is ruined—to the delight of our author and of the people of God: A civilization is dying, but the death of a civilization founded on evil and inspired of the Devil is glorious good news to the persecuted saints. The description of the destruction of Rome in chapter 18 is followed by, "Praise the Lord. Salvation, glory, power belong to our God, for his judgments are sound and upright.

After the destruction of the evil city, the destruction of the evil forces which were her sponsors. Messiah appears, a sign of the end. His great enemy the emperor, and the emperor-worship which is associated with him, are defeated and cast into the lake of fire which is eternal destruction.

Only Satan himself remains, and he is not destroyed immediately. In deference to the traditional Jewish idea that God's people would have an era of world supremacy, Satan is first bound and made helpless for a thousand years while Messiah and his people rule the world. Then he is sent to join his whole kingdom of evil in the fiery lake which means death, and God and his Messiah are left in complete and permanent control of a purified world.

Then comes the glorious end, the final salvation toward which all history had been moving. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away . . . And I saw the new Jerusalem, the holy city, come down out of heaven from God." (Rev. 21:1-2.)

It has been customary to interpret the description of this holy city which follows in the last two chapters of the book as a poetic picture of the heavenly home of



## STILL THE BIBLE SPEAKS

the blessed in the other world, but this is exactly to miss the climax of this great epic. It is not heaven; it is Jerusalem. It is not the other world; it is let down out of heaven on to this earth. Our whole problem has been that evil seemed to rule unrestrained in God's world, and faith dares to look forward to the universal reign of God.

There is nice poetic balance. Jerusalem was the city of God, the holy city, while Rome was the city of Satan, the great harlot. When our seer was writing, Jerusalem was in ashes, burned by Rome, while the emperor and his Roman power ruled the world. But this is soon to be reversed. Rome will be in ashes, burned by the wrath of God, while Christ and his redeemed people will rule from the holy city Jerusalem, a miraculous new Jerusalem, made in heaven and sent down to earth to be the capital of the kingdom of righteousness.

It is a glorious epic, a magnificent confession of faith in the ultimate triumph of God and goodness. But it is also a magnificent climax to our collection of scriptures. For how else *could* the scriptures end? If the seer of Patmos had not given us his vision, someone else must have written of the final triumph, for the struggle between good and evil could not be left indecisive. *God Must Win.*

Creation started with a perfect society, a family in a garden, where God's will was done because evil had not entered. But immediately evil did enter, and God's perfect reign was ended.

All the rest is the record of sinful man confronted by God, and of God's dealings with him. Man's hopes and despairs, his yearnings for the good and his enslavement to the evil, his progress, his disappointments, his tor-

## THE FINAL TRIUMPH

tured struggling against a world of evil—all of it is there. And through it all God works, correcting and disciplining, humbling and encouraging and redeeming. Is the tragic struggle which started in the garden to go on forever? Is there no answer to the tortured questionings as to the meaning of life, and no peace after the struggle is over?

Our author has his answer, which is born of faith, for there was nothing but faith to sustain him. There was nothing observable above the horizon on which to pin one's hopes. But his faith foresees a second perfect society, this time a city. All evil has been driven out. Its victims have been redeemed through Christ, the Conqueror of Satan. The reign of God has been re-established on earth, and the questions of the soul have their answer.

See! God's dwelling is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them, and he will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no death any longer, nor any grief or crying or pain. The old order has passed away. . . . See! I am making everything new! (Rev. 21:3-5.)

And he shall reign forever and ever! (Rev. 11:15.)



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